



NARISE KONOHARA
YUKI SHIMIZU

June Yaoi Novel



"Hey, I'm not a chubby chaser."

His head was filled with dangerous thoughts. Was he insane? Who did he think this man was? This was Imakura. The obese monster Imakura. How could he even think about lustng after him?

If you were stuck on a deserted island and you could pick one person to keep you company, who would you choose?

For Yuichi, it would be anyone but his uncooperative, self-absorbed, good-for-nothing boss Imakura! But as fate would have it, the two are mistakenly left on a deserted island during an important research expedition. Yuichi would prefer to drown Imakura in the sea with his bare hands rather than listen to his constant complaining. But as the days fade into weeks, Yuichi finds himself craving Imakura's company more than civilization itself.

Will the two find a forbidden love in this tropical paradise? Or will Yuichi and Imakura live out their lives stranded on a deserted island with the one person in the world they can't stand?

Originally published as a short story, *Don't Worry Mama* returns as a full-length novel with an all new bonus story, "Present." Written by Narise Konohara, one of Japan's best yaoi novelists, this story of "love on an island paradise" is sure to delight.

Don't Worry Mama

NARISE KONOHARA
YUKI SHIMIZU

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Yuichi wanted so badly to kiss the lips through which Imakura was lightly breathing. There was no way around it now; he had fallen hard.



Profile

Narise Konohara

Born October 27.

Scorpio.

Blood type O.

Has recently become obsessed with cosmetics and has tried numerous products. The most difficult thing is that it's too hard to tell which products work best when you're combining all different kinds of samples. Hmm...

\$Don't Worry *Mama*

Written by
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Illustrations by
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English translation by
Matthew Johnson



Los Angeles

DON'T WORRY MAMA

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Don't Worry Mama

Though the weather was nice, the waves were rough and the fishing boat rocked wildly. In the small, rank room, Yuichi Higashiyama forced a grin and answered, "That's right" to the bearded man as he held his backpack tightly on his lap.

"Pharmaceutical companies are having a tough time. It must be especially hard on someone young like you."

The bearded man who said he worked at an ornithology institute appeared to be in his fifties. He sat with his arms folded and his expression changed little as he talked. He said this wasn't his first trip to the island, and it seemed he was used to boats. Perhaps that's why he seemed unperturbed by the rocking. His companion, a man in his early forties who wore a hunting cap, showed no signs of seasickness either.

Yuichi had never experienced motion sickness before, and while it was not enough to make him vomit, he certainly was not feeling well. It helped to talk.

"The recession has really hurt us because we're just a small company and we don't have much of a budget for product development. Even so, management is always pushing us to come up with something new to sell. It's more than we can take."

The bearded man nodded slightly as he rubbed his chin.

"Why are you going to Fuchi Island," asked the man in the hunting cap.

"To find herbs that help you lose weight when you brew them as tea. They're normally native to Mexico and very difficult to grow. It's said that the environment in Japan is not conducive to cultivating them, yet I've heard reports of them growing on Fuchi Island. I don't know if they're still there or not--or if it's even true--but if I find them, I'll take them back and we'll try to cultivate them. If that's successful, we can make diet products..."

"Higashiyama!"

The high voice cut through the stench-filled room. Yuichi turned around and saw his boss, Takashi Imakura, standing at the entrance. Imakura had been throwing up on deck the since the instant they left port and the boat started rocking.

"That's a company secret. You shouldn't be talking about it with people you've just met. Unbelievable...how could you be so careless?"

Imakura was so fat that the belt on his chino pants looked like it might break at any moment. Though pale from sickness, he glared at Yuichi. "Fat" is a commonly used adjective, but the word was too kind for Imakura. He was so obese that he resembled a bull frog. On top of that, he was short--about five foot four. Yuichi was 6 foot so Imakura barely reached his chin when they stood next to each other.

The scolding darkened the atmosphere in the room. Even the men from the ornithology institute averted their gaze wishing they were somewhere else.

It may have been a little careless talking about the company's product development, but it's not like the others worked for a competitor. Yuichi couldn't help but wish that his boss had been a little more diplomatic in his choice of words.

"I'm sorry. But they're ornithologists..."

"Are you talking back to me?"

His excess weight had even made his face huge, though all the parts were concentrated in a small space in the center. His yelling protruded from lips so red they couldn't help but stand out. Yuichi realized that Imakura would not hold back just because the ornithologists were present, so he apologized again. Imakura let out a few pig-like snorts as if he was satisfied, then stumbled down the steps, and plopped down next to the young man. Between the narrow bench and being pushed up against the wall by the fat man, Yuichi started to become claustrophobic. It got even harder to bear when he noticed the looks of pity from the ornithologists.

Imakura continued to grunt even while seated, and the sound grated on Yuichi. It was only May and not hot yet, but beads of sweat were constantly forming on Imakura's brow and dribbling down his cheeks. He wiped them with his short, fat fingers that resembled pink, hairless caterpillars.

Imakura's neck looked like stacked rice cakes, boasting more quadruple chin than double. The buttons on his shirt barely held his bulk, the fabric stretched to burst like a hotdog in the microwave. It was beyond denying that Imakura was obese. No one at the company was brave enough to ask him his weight, but during

company-wide physicals last April, someone snuck a peek at Imakura's chart. It caused quite a stir when everyone heard that he weighed a mere 292 pounds. "300? More like 500," was the common refrain. Yuichi had always believed that there was more to people than looks, but when their personality was as bad as their appearance, there was just no helping them. On top of that, it would be too kind to say that Imakura was good at his work.

Yuichi had just turned 25, and Imakura was five years older. He had seniority at work thanks to a system that rewards years of service rather than skill, but he was slow and made many mistakes. Yuichi could forgive the mistakes if he would at least correct them and make things right, but that was far too much to ask. Imakura had no desire to work at all. He only did what he had to. Since it was up to Yuichi and his colleagues to clean up after him, Imakura's reputation was about as low as it could get. When Yuichi would go drinking with people from work, talk would inevitably turn to complaints about Imakura. They could go on all night just about him.

"I'd bet anything that he's a mama's boy. I heard him being all cutesy on his cell phone, saying 'What time will you be home, mama?' It was so gross, it gave me goose bumps." Such stories were common.

"When he goes to the bathroom, he even sits down to piss. It's because his dick is so small. I've seen it once before. I swear, I don't think it was even an inch long." The bar crowd would laugh at this.

Yuichi had never heard anything good said

about Imakura. He was as frustrated as everyone else, but while he listened to their grumbling, he never joined them. He didn't like complaining about others, and he took no joy in putting others down. Since he didn't make a face when given orders, and always did as he was told, Imakura had started to call on him exclusively at work. Imakura could have handled this trip on his own, and Yuichi couldn't help but feel that he had been dragged along uselessly and against his will.

Part of Yuichi's problem was his "class president" attitude. He had always been a serious student, and was elected class president all the way from elementary through high school. He liked being a leader and giving directions to others, and didn't mind doing jobs that others shunned. He didn't put up with bullies in his class, either. He had a strong sense of justice, and no matter how much he didn't like someone or they didn't get along, he always did his best to find the good in them.

These childhood habits followed him into adulthood, and while he prided himself on his steely exterior, he was known around work as "a person of character". No matter how unjust Imakura's actions seemed, he brushed them off by saying "he's the boss". But this meant that those above them assumed he could be pushed around, and he found himself the victim of their whims. He got angry, but he never said anything, and this just fueled the problem. He tried not to show his emotions, but in reality he had always been impatient and verbally abusive. Those who saw his true self, especially his younger brother Shuji, were amazed that



he was able to control himself long enough to get by in society. But what did they know...

The boat rocked wildly. Imakura let out a gulp, covered his mouth, and ran for the deck. With him gone, the physical and psychological claustrophobia disappeared, and a sense of relaxation returned to the room. Yuichi looked at the other two men as if to apologize for his boss, and bowed his head slightly.

Fuchi Island was only six miles long from its southern to its northern tip, and was oval in shape. Though small, it had a port and used to be home to a few dozen people. When the currents changed, disrupting the fishing grounds, the residents gradually moved away. The fact that it could only be reached by a two hour boat ride meant the exodus stayed permanent, and it was now a deserted island. The fast currents brought thick fog to the island, making the crossing dangerous. Fishing boats would only approach on afternoons when there was good weather.

They left Hamamatsu at seven in the morning, and arrived at the port at about 9:15 a.m. The two ornithologists had come to research gulls that were only found in this region. After exchanging pleasantries with Yuichi and Imakura at the dock, they set about their own business.

As for Yuichi and Imakura...they weren't making any headway at all. Yuichi slowly turned towards the problem. As Imakura stepped onto the pier, he let out one last burst of vomit. Yuichi waited for him to stop and then approached the big man noting that his violent heaving almost made his dark blue polo shirt rip

open across his rounded back.

"Are you all right?"

"Do I look all right?"

He understood why Imakura was in a bad mood, but Yuichi still didn't appreciate his attitude. Even as he inwardly cursed the fat man, his expression showed nothing.

"The boat will pick us up here at 4:00. Allowing time for lunch and rests, we only have about six hours."

Imakura remained sprawled on the dock, and vomited yet again into the water. He looked up pleadingly.

"Do we have to take a boat back?"

"I'm afraid so."

Lifting his head again with effort, Imakura glared at Yuichi with red puffy eyes that seemed overwhelmed by the surrounding skin.

"You don't understand the pain I'm in."

In addition to all of the other bad things he had done, his conduct towards the ornithologists was inexcusable. What little pity Yuichi had for Imakura's seasickness vanished. If he was that susceptible to seasickness, the least he could have done was bring along some medicine to help him through it. For heavens sake, he works for a pharmaceutical company! But that was what made Imakura the man he was. Even as he thought that there was no way he could sympathize with such a man, Yuichi pretended to be concerned as he spoke.

"I'm sorry. I've never had motion sickness..."

Convinced by the act, Imakura's mood

improved. Yuichi turned his eyes from this simple man to his watch. It read 9:30. He wanted to leave right away, but his partner was unable to proceed, so he tried to be patient. According to the map, the herbs were spotted on the southern tip of the island which was a two mile walk. Still, there was no guarantee that he would be able to find them there. If he didn't, he would have to look for them somewhere else.

That was one of the reasons he had spoken with the ornithologists. They said that their research facility was on the northern part of the island, which was perfect. If he could gain their interest and give them a sample of the herbs, perhaps they would keep an eye out for them and let him know during the boat ride back if they had seen any. There was no way he could cover the entire island in one day, so he planned to use all the resources available to him. Imakura dashed this plan but Yuichi should have known better than to count his chickens before they were hatched. Time was wasting as they sat around on the dock. Yuichi waited in the hot sun until the round man finally stood. Even then, Imakura gave no sign that he was ready to move. By 10:00, Yuichi couldn't stand it any longer.

"You seem to be feeling better. Let's head out. The air's fresh and the scenery's beautiful. It should make hiking easy."

He thought he had chosen his words carefully, but Imakura's glare told Yuichi that he had said something wrong.

"We're working. This isn't a pleasure outing for hiking."

Inside, Yuichi was exploding with an anger he hadn't felt for some time, but his face showed only the slightest downturn of his lips. The expression lasted only a fraction of second. Yuichi had nothing but dark, evil thoughts for Imakura even as he hid them with a placid smile. The moment passed like a cloud from the sun.

If they couldn't find the herb today, their trip would be for nothing. Yuichi knew the section chief would not be happy and that he would hear about it. If Imakura said that one day was not enough to search, they might be forced to come again. Still, the company's finances were so bad he didn't know if they could afford to travel again, or if the entire diet pill project would be scrapped. Imakura was the leader of the project. He was the one who would be in trouble if they couldn't find anything. Yuichi was nothing more than an assistant. Still, he had no doubt that Imakura would blame a fruitless trip on him. He could see it now. Yuichi gave out a short sigh.

"I've thrown up so much that I would dehydrate if I walked in this heat. Can't you see that?"

There was nothing Yuichi could say to placate him.

"I guess so...why don't you wait here? I'll hike to the southern part of the island myself. I don't think I can make it back by noon, so I'll take my own lunch. If you start to feel better, why don't you search over there."

"Whatever."

Imakura threw the map at Yuichi like he had been waiting for him to say that from the very beginning



and had become tired of waiting. He plopped down in the shade. Sweat beaded on his red forehead and the wrinkles of his belly were beyond ugly. Yuichi grabbed his backpack with its small shovel and plastic sample cases then turned his back on the bane of his existence. He walked down the unpaved road quickly as if moving away would put distance between him and the fat man in mind as well as body.

The sun set slowly and the hot day dragged on towards a muggy evening. Yuichi stood on the dock and felt his sticky forehead dripping with sweat from a hard days work. It was only 15 minutes past the agreed upon pick-up time of 4 p.m., but even squinting as he looked over the water, he didn't see their boat.

"Where's our boat...?"

"Can't you see that it's not here?"

Imakura looked out across the water as well, but his words were sharp. Yuichi cringed every time he spoke but did his best to keep his anger from showing.

"I wonder if it ran into trouble. It's also strange that the ornithologists aren't here yet. I was sure the boat we saw just before 4:00 was ours."

"But it didn't even approach."

Why didn't the boat come into port? And if the boat he saw earlier was theirs, Yuichi wondered why it left without picking them up.

"I doubt they would have picked up the others and left us here..."

"This is all your fault!"

Out of nowhere, Imakura exploded.

"You're the one who arranged for the fishing boats to transport us! This happened because you hired someone who couldn't be trusted. Even if it cost more, you should have hired a cruiser. It wouldn't have rocked as much and I wouldn't have gotten so sick."

There was no way the company would have allowed him to hire a cruiser for this kind of research trip. Imakura should have known that but he was becoming irrational. He was still complaining as Yuichi fished for his cell phone and notebook in his backpack.

"Didn't your parents teach you to listen while others are talking?"

He ignored Imakura's hysterics and dialed the fisherman's guild that had helped him book the boats. The woman in the office said she would radio the boat that was supposed to pick them up and call him right back. Yuichi made sure she knew his number before hanging up and turned to the fat man behind him.

"They're going to contact our boat for us."

"You should have called them earlier. What have you been doing till now?"

Knowing that he would only get angrier if he answered, Yuichi let the words slide off him and sat down. Holding his cell phone in his right hand, he waited for the guild to return his call, but after ten minutes, nothing happened. He looked at his cell phone and his jaw dropped. There was no display. He pushed power, but nothing happened...the battery had run out. He turned to his boss in alarm.

"Did you bring your cell phone?"

"Of course I did."

The frown did not leave Imakura's face when he answered.

"May I borrow it, please?"

"Use yours."

Imakura didn't even turn as he answered, and Yuichi could no longer hide his displeasure.

"My battery ran out. I'm sorry."

"Unbelievable..."

Imakura grumbled as he looked through his bag, but...no matter how much he looked his cell phone never appeared.

He started to repeat, "That's strange. How can this be?"

"Did you forget it?" Yuichi was torn between yelling at the man and giving into growing panic that the situation had caused.

Imakura's face reddened with anger.

"Shut up. I'm looking."

But still there was no cell phone.

"I was sure I put it in my bag this morning..."

His voice started to lose its certainty. Stranded with no working cell phone...the reality of the situation was just coming to Yuichi when a cool ocean breeze interrupted his thoughts. Turning around, he saw that the sun had already halfway disappeared below the horizon dragging thick darkness behind it like a blanket. He had thought it was getting hard to see because of his anxiety but now he noticed that a thick fog was starting to mist the dock. If they had no way to contact anyone, there was nothing they could do. There is no lighthouse on a deserted island, so there was no way a boat would

attempt to approach the port in the dark, and doubly so in the fog.

"I've already spoken to the guild and they should have told our boat that they forgot to pick us up. Still, I don't think the boat will come in this fog. Let's give up for the day and look for a place to sleep." Yuichi sounded braver than he felt.

It seemed the right decision for their circumstance, but Imakura's response was as rapid as a machine gun.

"This is all your fault. Are you saying you expect me to...to sleep outdoors? No way. And what will we do for dinner? I can't sleep if I'm hungry."

It was not the response of an adult. Even Yuichi wasn't wild about the idea of sleeping outside, but he wasn't going to cry about it. He looked down at his pig of a boss and could not believe how selfish he was. He could only think of him as a fool.

"But we can't stay here," he said halfheartedly.

Imakura seemed to notice the attitude in his voice, and he almost spit his response.

"You have no idea of the gravity of the situation. You were even giving out company secrets to those men you just met." His screams hurt Yuichi's ears.

"Imakura, could you please keep your voice down?"

But he was too worked up to listen to Yuichi. He continued to rant.

"I've never liked you. Everyone says you're good at your job, but I never agreed. You trick people with your cool exterior, but you're irresponsible."

Yuichi's thoughts turned darker. "You should talk," he thought. "Other people at the company won't even hide their contempt for you. You only chose me, the one who you apparently don't like, for this trip because I'm the only one who doesn't make faces when you order me to do something." But he said nothing out loud.

Yuichi's body began to shake. He wanted more than anything to scream "pig", but he clenched his fists to keep from doing so. His porcine superior continued to look up at him blithely unaware of his peril.

"I can't believe someone like you can get promoted by just sucking up to others. Suginoki Pharmaceuticals has no future because of workers like you.

Yuichi heard something snap in his head.

"Would you just shut up?" He came to after muttering this. Imakura's face grew redder and redder with anger. Yuichi quickly bowed in apology realizing what he'd just said to his boss.

"Please forgive me. I'm just on edge. Um... there are houses to the east. Why don't we head that way. They may not be in good shape, but they should at least protect us from the elements."

Imakura stood in silence holding his backpack to his chest. He turned away from Yuichi and they headed off towards the houses. Yuichi swung his backpack over his shoulder and followed the huge back and imagined he was chasing a boar. He wanted his relationships at work to go well so he'd tried his best to get along with Imakura. Yet that effort had all been for nothing. He was

sad that he hadn't been able to let Imakura's abuse slide this time, but once he realized that there was no risk of being disliked, things seemed a little easier. In fact, it was probably better not to be liked, and he was a little angry that he had put up with him for so long.

Yoshiwara Tae, the clerk at the fisherman guild office that received the call from the pharmaceutical company, radioed the Fujiwara-maru. The skipper of the Fujiwara-maru was a fisherman in his seventies named Genzo. Genzo answered immediately that he had picked up two men and was now heading for port. Tae put down the receiver, but was confused. The man from the pharmaceutical company said the boat hadn't come, but Genzo said that he had already picked them up. It was strange, but Genzo was an honest man and there was no reason not to believe him. He must have arrived just after the phone call she reasoned.

Though she convinced herself that this had to be the case, she decided to check. She dialed the man's cell phone, but the call didn't go through. Perhaps he had turned it off. Tae put down the receiver and threw the slip of paper with the man's phone number in the trash.

Tae simply didn't know that the boat they took to the island and the one they planned to take back was different. Genzo was only supposed to pick them up. The fisherman who took them told Genzo that he had taken "two groups with two men each" to the island, but Genzo, who was hard of hearing, misheard it as "a group of two men". As he approached the northern tip of the island, he ran across the ornithologists and they boarded there. He

never went to the dock. One of the ornithologists thought this was strange and asked why he didn't pick up the men from the pharmaceutical company, but Genzo was convinced he was only supposed to pick up a "group of two" and answered that everyone who was supposed to be aboard was. The ornithologist didn't think the others looked like they were prepared to stay overnight, but the fisherman seemed sure of the information so the scientist let it drop. The only person who knew that there were two men stuck on the island was a simple office worker named Tae.

The abandoned houses were filled with dust and spider webs. The curtains had browned, and the glass in the windowpanes was cracked. Yuichi wouldn't have been surprised if ghosts came out of the closets. But it was only for one night so Yuichi convinced himself that it was much better than sleeping outside. He found a number of futons and blankets in the closet. He didn't know how long they had been there, but he was sure that it was long enough to be infested with mites. Still, he didn't want to sleep directly on the dirty floor. After mulling over the situation, he pulled out a futon and laid it out.

"Do you want one? The floor is really dirty."

Imakura snorted in the dark at his words.

"You have no idea who's used it. How can you think about sleeping on it?"

Yuichi kicked himself for even asking. Taking out a single futon, he put it on the ground and lay down. He was hungry, but tired enough from his hike around

the island that he was certain he could sleep. Yawning listlessly, he wondered why he found himself in this position with someone so loathsome. He hadn't wanted to come. If he had been more forthcoming in his desire not to come, he wouldn't have had to deal with Imakura more than necessary, and he would not be angry now.

"Yuichi, you always try too hard to please everyone."

He had lost count how many times his friend Tomoharu, the gay bar owner had said this. Tomoharu was an athletic man with a sculpted body, but spoke with a distinctively feminine voice.

"Still, you are the gay man's gay man. You're kind and think of your partner, yet while you're nice, you aren't perfect. You're tall, thin and handsome, and if you weren't into younger men, I'd take you myself. I have no idea what turns you on about those hairless crotches."

His friend sighed as he said this, but Yuichi would not give in to Tomoharu's attraction. He could never be with anyone but a clean cut hairless man no matter how handsome or sexy, or how good a lover someone might be.

Yuichi realized he was gay in junior high. Ever since elementary school he had only been attracted to other boys, and he always thought it strange that his strongest crush was on Kazuki, another boy in his class. His curiosity peaked in junior high when he started to have wet dreams about other boys. He learned from a magazine that a classmate had brought to school that there were many others like him, and realized that he

was "gay". It seemed unnatural, and throughout his college years he tried to keep it hidden to avoid being scorned. He even forced himself to date girls, but those relationships never lasted. Then his repressed libido exploded to the surface in the spring of his 22nd year as he was looking for job after college. When stress built up to the breaking point at work, he went to a part of town with "those kind" of establishments and then straight to a hotel with the first man he saw. He made the man scream repeatedly, and left the following morning. It had been the first time he'd stayed out all night and he was still filled with lust. As he sat with his family for a quiet breakfast, he declared, "I'm gay". Everybody laughed like he was joking, but seeing their eldest son's expression, they realized he was serious. Yuichi got down on the ground and kowtowed in front of his parents.

"Please give up any hope of me marrying and giving you grandkids, but I will do my best to be the best son ever. In return..."

Yuichi grabbed the collar of his younger brother, Yuji, who was twenty at the time.

"I will make it my mission to ensure that the Higashiyama line lives on through him. I promise."

And as Yuichi had planned, his brother married a woman Yuichi introduced him to just last spring. They even had children as if forced. He'd fulfilled his duty to his parents and thought that he could now follow his own bliss. The problem was, now he could not find the right man. Not that there was any lack of men who tried to get his attention, but when he found one that he might

like, it never lasted long. Tomoharu complained that he was too picky.

"They don't stay young sexy things forever, you know. Even the most beautiful young men lose their appeal. Perhaps you should try someone your own age. If you'd like, I can introduce you to someone. There are a lot of men who come to the bar who are very attracted to you."

But Yuichi had no intention of straying from his tastes in men. He would never say it for fear of ridicule, but he fantasized about taking in a young boy and molding him, just like Hikaru Genji in "The Tales of Genji". But that took time and money. It wasn't realistic, but one can always dream. Yuichi kept up his search for a beautiful boy with white skin while satisfying his lust with whoever was convenient at the time.

He remembered that he was supposed to go to Tomoharu's bar tonight when he got back. Tomoharu liked the condoms that Yuichi's company made, and so he'd promised to bring some by for his friend. At the bottom of his backpack sat a handful of "Like A Virgin" which were the newest condoms from his company cursed with the worst name just like the rest of the line. As Yuichi sat on the futon growing hungry, he couldn't help but think that he should have packed some vitamin supplements, or something else that would have helped settle his stomach. He lay silently for an hour, but it had gotten dark early and he could not sleep. Hearing a sound, he looked over to find Imakura crawling on all fours over the tatami mats. Just as Yuichi was wondering what he was doing, he quickly opened the closet doors

and took out a futon. Even though he insisted that he didn't need one, he must have found that it was difficult to sleep on top of the tatami.

"I offered but you spit in my face. Idiot," Yuichi thought to himself.

This spiteful thought helped improve his mood, and just as he was about to doze off, he could hear a crinkling noise. The sound was accompanied by the sweet smell of chocolate. "It can't be," he thought, and it was difficult to see, but...there was the sound of chewing and the smell grew distinct. Imakura was eating something. He couldn't see clearly, but he was certain. "All by himself..." The moment Yuichi realized that he became very sad. Imakura had food with him but he'd waited until he thought Yuichi was asleep to take it out. He knew that Yuichi had nothing to eat and was hungry and yet he didn't offer him any. Nonetheless, Yuichi couldn't bring himself to ask for any.

It was Imakura's food; it was his right to eat it himself. Even so...these were not normal circumstances. One would think Imakura might want to be helpful or would think enough to offer some. If it was Yuichi who had the food he would have given Imakura some even though he hated him. Yuichi wouldn't let him stay hungry. Spurred by the smell, Yuichi's stomach growled and deep in his heart, his hatred for Imakura grew.

Yuichi awoke to a chill that made him shake and loud snoring. It was still dark, and his watch claimed it was 6 a.m. He glared at the pale pig whose snoring sounded more like a bullfrog. Quietly he opened the

poorly hung door and stepped outside. The air was fresh as it can be only in the morning, but thick fog still covered the area, giving it an eerie feel. Birds chirped, but he had no idea from which direction the sound originated.

He wanted to return to the dock, but he couldn't even see a few feet in front of himself and worried about getting lost. He decided to wait until the fog lifted, and sat down on the porch. As he rubbed his eyes, he became aware of just how dirty his face was. He thought about washing it, and even tried the garden faucet, but not a single drop came out so he abandoned this plan. A laugh filled with despair bellowed out from his belly.

As he sat quietly, he realized that he had to pee, and when he walked to back of the house, he found something interesting. It was an old well. He took off the rusty lead cover and peered inside but it was so dark he couldn't tell if there was water or not. He dropped in a small stone to test it and after a second he heard a faint 'plop'. He started searching for a rope and bucket and found what he needed in the house shed. He could barely contain his excitement as he lowered the bucket on the rope into the well. The water was clear and fresh. Taking a small amount into his mouth, it was free from odor and taste. He gulped it down, and used the rest to wash his face.

"Highashiyama....Higashiyama..."

He heard his name being called. The voice was desperate, and wondering if the boat had come, he hurried back to the front of the house. There he found Imakura stumbling through the garden looking as if he

were about to cry. When Imakura saw Yuichi, he brought his hand to his chest as if relieved.

"You scared me. I thought you had left me alone here."

"I'm not you. I wouldn't do that..." Yuichi thought it but he couldn't say it aloud. "The cold woke me and I was walking around. I see you woke up early, too."

Imakura snorted.

"I haven't eaten since yesterday afternoon. My hunger wakened me. I wish I had one of mama's homemade chocolate muffins. Remember, I blame all of this on you. Mama must be worried. When we get back, you must apologize to her."

As he talked, Yuichi noticed dark islands of chocolate floating around the man's lips. He couldn't believe Imakura would lie so openly about not eating since yesterday afternoon, but he let it slide.

"There's a well in back. Why don't you try washing your face? It's good water and you can drink it too."

"Really? Good. I've been thirsty since yesterday."

"You're thirsty because you've been eating sweets," Yuichi thought as he led Imakura to the well and drew water for him. Imakura complained that there were no cups as he drank from his palm and washed his face.

"Imakura..."

Imakura was carefully cleaning his face like a cat with his gingham handkerchief.

"What?"

"The area around your mouth was dirty, but it looks like you got it."

Imakura's shoulders jerked, and he did everything to avoid looking at Yuichi.

"Did I? The futon was just filthy."

Yuichi became painfully aware that he could expect nothing from his companion. The fog was lifting and visibility improved. It was clear enough to see that there was no boat at the dock.

"I've been thinking. We don't know when the boat might come. Why don't we take turns keeping watch?"

The moment he said this, Imakura's face showed his worry.

"You've gotten me into this mess and now you want to put me to work?"

"I bet you're hungry. We don't know when the boat will come, so let's have one of us keep watch while the other searches for food. Which would you rather do?"

He deliberately emphasized 'I bet you're hungry'. Yuichi knew that Imakura couldn't be bothered to search for food--he had just eaten the chocolate last night--and just as he guessed Imakura chose to watch for the boat.

Leaving his backpack on the dock, Yuichi started off on his search. He had hoped that at least one of the abandoned houses might still have some canned food, but those hopes were dashed after a quick check of each. He did find a bottle of pickled plums under the

sink of one house, but when he opened the lid in joy, he found an intricate web of white and green mold. His search came up empty so he tried to soothe his empty stomach with water from the well before heading back to the dock. When Imakura saw that he was empty-handed he couldn't hide his frown.

"Didn't you say you were going to look for food?" These cold words were not what Yuichi wanted to hear after his disappointing search.

"I'm sorry. I looked though a number of empty houses but didn't find anything. I'll take over as lookout."

"I'm not going to look for anything." Imakura turned his head away. "I'm not very hungry because I haven't moved much today."

Yuichi wanted to yell, to scream "You were eating last night and you have all that fat to tide you over!" But instead he merely gritted his teeth and bit his tongue. "Then do you mind if I continue looking? There are more houses a little further away."

Imakura sighed in disappointment.

"If the boat should come while you're gone I'll have to search for you. I don't want to do that. It should be here soon. Why don't you wait with me?"

Yuichi couldn't argue with him. He held his stomach, though it hadn't been satisfied with just water, and sat down next to Imakura. He told himself that he had to put up with this just a little bit longer.

Three hours went by and the boat didn't show up. The sun began to set again. As the day darkened the

fog returned. Imakura headed back to the house without saying a single word to Yuichi. They both laid down on their own futons without speaking.

Yuichi's stomach was in an uproar now and he had trouble getting to sleep. The weather was nice so the boat couldn't have been held up by rough seas. Imakura was at the dock all day so there was no way he could have missed it. Why didn't the boat come? Had they been forgotten? If that was the case, the ornithologists would be in the same predicament. Where were they? Did the boat pick them up alone and leave Yuichi and Imakura behind? The more he thought about it, the more difficulty he had understanding why they'd been left here. Even if they'd been forgotten they both lived with their parents who were sure to put out a missing persons report. He'd filed information on their trip with the company, so they knew the two were headed for a deserted island and were sure to do something to find them. However, no matter how many times he told himself everything would be OK, his mind was still uneasy. Just then, he heard it again: the sound of chewing. His sense of smell was three times more sensitive due to hunger and he was certain he caught whiffs of chocolate and maybe shrimp crackers. Last night he pretended he didn't notice, but today he couldn't hold back.

"Imakura?"

The sound of chewing came to an abrupt stop with a wet smack. Yuichi approached the round pig's back helped by the faint light of the moon coming through the cracked window. As he approached Imakura he found him with crackers in his right hand, chocolate

in his left hand, and a guilty look on his face.

"Could you please give me some crackers? I just need a few. I'm so hungry that I can't sleep."

Imakura lifted his face.

"I bought these with my own money. Why do I have to share them with you?"

"I know they're yours. But I'm really hungry..."

Imakura's expression turned from one of awkwardness to impudence.

"They're mine. There is no reason I have to share with you, and no reason I should feel bad for not sharing."

They were in dire straits. Instead of worrying about who spent how much on what, they should have been doing their best to help each other until they were out of trouble. Yuichi lost all faith in his boss due to his childish, selfish behavior. He had no idea that Imakura was such a heartless person. Yuichi regretted asking for the food after staring at the fat man with a look that begged not to be disappointed any further. Imakura's response was to fill his mouth with chocolate and munch away.

"Good. Now I don't have to worry. I felt bad for you because I had food and you didn't. That's why I had no choice but to hide it from you."

For the first time in his life Yuichi felt as though he could kill someone. He wanted to pound and kick his fat face until it was no longer recognizable and toss him into the sea. He knew he wouldn't be able to lift the man



and the absurd thought of him rolling the corpse off the dock lightened his mood considerably.

Meanwhile, Imakura stared at Yuichi through the thin slits of his eyelids and pursed his lips before he spoke.

"Don't look at me like you want it so much. It's making it hard to eat."

Yuichi's whole body burned with misery. Hands clenched tight into fists, arms stiff at his sides, he left the house. Going around back, he chugged down as much water as he could. He also washed his face in an attempt to cool his anger. The only sound was his heavy breathing. Yuichi leaned his hands on the lip of the bucket and looked at his dark reflection in the water. He turned to face the breeze and saw the dilapidated garden shining in the light of the moon. He stumbled towards a corner of the garden and began to pick what looked like dandelion leaves. He put them in his mouth and chewed. His tongue recoiled at the bitterness and the leaves tasted bad enough to make him want to vomit. Still, he forced them down. Tears started to roll down his cheeks, but he didn't know if they were caused by the bitter leaves or Imakura's bitter heart.

He sat for about an hour on the porch. Even though it was May, the night was chilly and his nose started to run. Though he didn't want to breathe the same air as the other man, the desire for the warm soft futon was stronger. When he went inside, he saw Imakura was lying down. The only thing remaining of what he had eaten was the sweet smell. Perhaps startled by the creaking of the tatami mats the round man turned.

"Where did you go?"

Yuichi didn't answer.

"I was wondering what had happened when you didn't come back. You looked so sad that I thought I would share, but I got tired of waiting and ate it myself."

It was no doubt a lie. Once the deed is done, people will say anything to make themselves feel better. Yuichi held back his anger and merely smiled.

"Thank you for thinking of me, but you should take good care of yourself. You never know when we'll be picked up," Yuichi said sarcastically.

"Oh, they'll come tomorrow." His face beamed with confidence, but Yuichi couldn't see where that feeling had come from. "I've never stayed out all night without contacting my mother. I know she'll come looking for me. I told her that I would be gone overnight, and even though I didn't tell her where I was going, all she has to do is call the office. She probably couldn't make it today, but I know she'll be here tomorrow."

Even if Imakura's mother didn't come, if they were gone from the office for three days without calling in, their company was sure to find it strange and come searching for them. They should only be here for another day or two...When he considered this, the memory of desperately eating the leaves filled him with regret. Yuichi laid down on the futon with his mood as dark as the stains on his bed.

Takashi Imakura's mother Yoshie was pale as she stood in front of Suginoki Pharmaceuticals. She was

short and had fair skin, and though she was not thin, she certainly was not overweight like her son. She grasped her lace handkerchief as she looked up at the company's sign. Her beloved son failed to come home yesterday. It was the first time he had been out overnight without calling her, and she had not been able to sleep due to worry.

After losing her husband in a horrible accident 25 years ago, she had raised her beloved son on her own. She could only imagine the worst: he'd been kidnapped or had been in a terrible accident. She felt faint and nearly staggered. She had called his company many times but every time she got a busy signal. No longer able to contain her worry, she set out to visit Suginoki Pharmaceuticals. Just as she had seen on television, the entrance to the company was blocked by numerous cameras and men holding microphones, and the building was ringed with vans printed with the names of television stations.

"Suginoki Pharmaceuticals Files For Bankruptcy. \$13 Million In Debt. President Missing."

It's not that Yoshie was ignorant of the news that had been plastered on the front page of the newspaper yesterday, but she could only think of her son. She was finally able to squeeze in between the reporters and make it to the entrance. But the doors were locked tight. As the day wore on she wandered to the back of the building and saw a young man entering a back door. Without thinking, she sidled up behind him and followed. Though the man was startled by her sudden appearance he listened to her story.

"I'm not in the Product Development Department, so I don't know...there's an utter state of confusion inside...Perhaps you should ask someone in that department."

He let her in, under strict instructions that she tell no one that he'd done so. She walked down a narrow corridor until she reached the entrance lobby which was filled with young men running around with files. The receptionist was in over her head answering the phones and in no position to acknowledge her, but as she looked around, she found a directory next to the elevators. The Product Development Department where her son worked was on the second floor. She was too impatient to wait for the elevator and used the stairs. The room labeled Product Development Department was a scary sight. Though it was not as bustling as the lobby, the phones were ringing off the hook and the sound of angry people could be heard from all corners.

"I told you that we lowly workers don't know anything. We hear about the bankruptcy on the news. Delivery? Does it really look like we're in any position to talk about that?" The middle aged man screamed into the phone. Yoshie looked around, and finding a young woman who looked kind, approached her.

"Um...do you mind if I ask you a question?"

The long-haired woman looked exhausted as she turned around.

"Good afternoon. I'm Takashi Imakura's mother." The woman nodded and looked confused. Yoshie took one step forward.

"I'm sorry to bother you but...my son hasn't

come home since yesterday. I was worried and came here looking for information."

The woman looked as though she'd seen a ghost. Yoshie had to wonder if she had said something wrong.

"He's never stayed out all night without permission. I can't help but worry that while on this business trip he's been kidnapped or...murdered...oh my..."

The woman was clearly perplexed.

"Mr. Imakura is not my superior, so...could you please wait a moment? I'll ask one of his subordinates."

The woman came back after a minute.

"Mr. Imakura is on a business trip with Mr. Higashiyama. Mr. Higashiyama has left his home and cell phone number. Please call him."

Yoshie thanked the woman and took the post-it with the phone numbers out with her into the hall and called the number immediately. The cell phone number didn't work, and when she called his home, a woman answered. She said that Higashiyama had not yet come home and that he hadn't called. The woman didn't seem nearly as concerned as Yoshie was. Yoshie was disappointed that she hadn't learned anything new and hung up. She returned to the room to speak to the woman again.

"Um...they said they're both out on business and their son hasn't come home yet. Where did they go?"

"I really can't say. I don't know." The young woman furrowed her brow as if bothered that Yoshie had

come back. Her tone made it clear that she didn't want to talk anymore, but Yoshie wouldn't give up.

"You could be more helpful. If something has happened to him, your company is liable."

In response the woman slammed the papers she was holding onto the table.

"Not helpful? I told you that I don't work with Mr. Imakura. If he took off on his own we have no way of knowing where he went."

"Fine. I understand. I won't bother you anymore, but I will find my son. Could you at least tell me where he went?" Yoshie was angered by the receptionist's attitude. The woman stood up, turned her back dismissively, and walked to a filing cabinet in the corner with her heels clacking on the tile floor as she went. The place had otherwise grown quiet.

"Doesn't she know what's going on today," the woman said under her breath. But she'd made sure to say it loud enough so Yoshie could hear her above the rustling of files. "They've gone to Naha in Okinawa." She spat the words after she'd returned to her seat.

"What part of Naha?"

"It doesn't say. It only says 'Naha'."

Yoshie did not cower at her aggressive tone but smiled a sad little smile before she spoke.

"Thank you. I'm sorry to bother you on this busy day."

She turned and left the building. She'd traveled to Okinawa once with her late husband. She could pack some things and buy a ticket...and...Yoshie had no idea that the woman had mistakenly taken out a business trip

file from the previous year. There was no way she could know that her son was not in Naha, but on a deserted island off the coast of Shizuoka.

The third day passed without the hint of a boat on the horizon. Yuichi had spent the day looking for food in the abandoned houses, but found nothing. As the sun started to set, his stomach growled endlessly and he returned to the house he was using as a shelter. Imakura was laying on his futon. Yuichi had asked him to watch for a boat, but he probably came back early when the fog started to roll in. As Yuichi sat on his own futon, Imakura turned.

"Did you find anything?"

"What?"

"Any food? You did look for food today, didn't you?" Imakura's sarcastic tone felt like a blow to Yuichi's chest.

"I looked, but I didn't find anything."

Imakura sat up heavily.

"What were you doing then? If you didn't find anything, you wasted a whole day."

"There really wasn't anything..."

Snorting, Imakura turned away from Yuichi. Yuichi was certain his attitude was caused by his mood and then he understood the reason for his disposition. A stomach growled ravenously and it wasn't his. After a few seconds, it happened again like the roar of a lion trapped in the man's gut. Yuichi began smiling unconsciously. On day three, Imakura had finally run out of the food he refused to share with Yuichi. Thinking

that justice was finally being served, Yuichi laid down on his futon and laughed hard enough that his shoulders shook. He was so happy that he almost forgot just how hungry he was. Imakura ignored him lost in his own troubles.

On the morning of the fourth day, Yuichi caught Imakura gulping down water from the well. It made him feel superior to see Imakura now trying to placate his empty stomach by filling it with water just as he had done. He once again went in search of food as Imakura kept watch but he grew tired after walking just a short distance. Not having eaten in three days, and all the while walking around the island, his strength was finally giving out. Starvation became a real fear.

As he rested in the shade of a tree, he figured out that he had to do more than look in houses. He should start foraging for nuts and other natural foods. He walked to a field behind one of the empty houses. In one weedy corner, looking closely, he found something that looked like carrot leaves. He pulled one, and though it was misshaped, there was a carrot at the end. He pulled up ten more, his mind in a haze, and found more around him. He was happier than when he passed his university entrance exam and threw up his hands, still holding the carrots, in a victory pose. Dirt rained down on him.

Yuichi pulled up about 20 half-wild carrots and took them to the abandoned house they were using as shelter. He collected some kindling and dried grass and lit it with matches he'd found during his search. Sticking a carrot on a stick, he cooked it over the open fire. He couldn't wait for it to warm through and ended up eating

it like an animal. The middle was still raw, but he only tasted the sweetness. It was delicious and he shed tears of happiness. He cooked five more, put them in a pot he found in the house, and headed for the dock. He hated Imakura enough that he would kill him if not for the legal consequences, but he knew better than anybody the misery of an empty stomach. Also, he didn't want to be the type of person who hoarded all of the food or he'd become a hypocrite and as bad as the fat man.

"Would you like some?" he yelled toward the round back sitting on the dock. Imakura dashed toward the pot, but did not hide his disgust when he looked inside it.

"I don't like vegetables."

"But you haven't eaten since yesterday. I've already had one and it was really good."

"I don't like them." Even as he spoke his stomach was growling. If he didn't want any, then fine...but Yuichi tried another tactic.

"Even if you don't like them, if you don't eat, the hunger will keep you up."

Imakura bit his lip and stared at the carrots. His head shot up.

"Don't talk like you know me. If I starve to death...it will be your fault!"

Yuichi sighed at his childish behavior.

"It's not starvation if you have food but refuse to eat it."

"Excuse me?"

"Don't be so childish. Eat. They're really good."

Yuichi reached in the pot for a carrot and ate it, making sure to make as much noise chewing as possible. Imakura looked like he was about to cry and his mouth hung open. His round clenched hands started shaking. He was hungry but he didn't like carrots. Yuichi could see the battle in his head played out in his eyes. Suddenly, his right hand was hit and there was a loud clang. It was over in an instant. Imakura had kicked the pot. The pot fell on the concrete, and the carrots scattered everywhere.

"Oops. I just meant to stretch my leg. I didn't realize I would hit it."

Imakura grinned impishly. Without saying anything Yuichi picked up the carrots. From now on, no matter how much Imakura begged there was no way he would ever share food with him. He made this decision in lieu of yelling. As he reached for the last carrot a dark shadow suddenly fell upon it. Without having time to figure out what was happening, the carrot was crushed underfoot. Lifting his head, Yuichi saw that quadruple chin.

"You were just going to throw it away anyways."

Imakura dug his heel into the carrot and shook his shoulders in an exaggerated fashion.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Were you thinking about eating it off the ground? That would make you no better than a dog. Worse than a dog..."

Yuichi snapped. He'd been able to hold back until now because his companion was his boss and had power over him. But that ended now. Yuichi stood up



quickly and grabbed Imakura by the shirt. The round pig's face showed both surprise and fear. That made Yuichi happy.

"If I'm worse than a dog then you're worse than a cockroach!" He growled this in Imakura's ear and then punched him in the face. The three hundred pound giant screamed loudly as he fell back onto the concrete. He started to crawl like a caterpillar while sobbing in pain.

"I'll sue you for assault. I...I'll tell my mother!"

Now that Yuichi had lost all patience, his iron expression also gave way.

"Good. Just try suing me for assault. I'll pound you to death first! What do you mean 'dog'? If I'm a dog, you're a white pig. You just keep getting fatter and fatter, and still talk about your mama. You make me sick, you mother-loving freak."

Still holding his cheek, Imakura looked at Yuichi with an expression of disbelief. Yuichi felt sick just looking at his obese body and kicked him hard in the ass. Imakura screamed in pain and tried to scrabble out of range.

"Go away! This is all your fault! I should have never trusted you to make plans for the boat! I am the victim here!"

"Shut the hell up!"

Yuichi swung his leg and Imakura covered his head and cowered. Like a cat playing with a mouse Yuichi tapped Imakura's back with his foot.

"For the sake of both of our sanities, I think we should each live on our own. From now on we'll look out for ourselves. I'm sure it'll be easier on you as well."

Yuichi left Imakura coiled in fear. He went back to the house and collected his things. From the entrance, he could see the large figure still motionless on the dock, but he ignored his boss and headed south down the dirt road.

The house Yuichi had been using with Imakura was close to the dock but now he picked another house from among a group of five that sat about a quarter of a mile away. He chose it because it was still in relatively good shape and there was a good well in back. Sitting cross-legged in the middle of the main room, Yuichi thought deeply about his predicament. Four days had passed without anyone coming to pick them up. He'd left information about where they were going and where they were staying at the office so that anybody who wanted to find them shouldn't have a problem. Perhaps they wanted to come but couldn't. He started to worry. Perhaps there had been an accident, or someone got hurt... Had something happened to his family that kept them from being able to search? If that was the case, there was no telling how long he'd be here.

Then a terrible thought crossed his mind. That reasoning worked if it was just him, but Imakura was here too. If that fat pig was spoiled so much by his mother, there is no way she would sit by doing nothing. Something must be very wrong.

If he sat around, he would think too much, which was not a good thing. He knew himself that well. To combat his sense of dread Yuichi cleaned his new home. He started by separating the useful items from those that had no use. He'd already rummaged through the neighboring houses and gathered eating utensils and a kettle, pots, and candles. He also found a fire stand and even a sack of charcoal to use with it. He'd seen a fire stand used a long time ago at his grandfather's house in the country and knew that it could be used in place of a stove. It was difficult to manage but it was easier than building an oven out of rocks the way he'd learned at summer camp years ago.

Cleaning helped keep his mind off everything that could go wrong but he stopped when he thought that a boat could come and he might be wasting his time. But then he realized how much more comfortable he would be if everything was in place if he had to wait a week, so he started cleaning again. He opened the window to let in fresh air. As he wiped the filthy tatami mats with an equally filthy rag he thought about how much easier things were now that he was alone. When he was with Imakura he was constantly paying attention to him...and putting up with his abuse. It was like a huge weight was lifted from his shoulders.

The house Yuichi chose stood on a hill facing south so he could see the dock and the ocean from its porch. He could watch for boats without having to go down the hill. Still, he had to forage for food so he couldn't be on the lookout all day long. Yuichi tore a sheet he had found next door, and used charcoal to write

'SOS' on it in case any passing boat had reason to look on shore. In the evening, before the fog rolled in, he went to the field he had found earlier and harvested more carrots. He looked around to see if there was anything else and was rewarded by discovering potatoes. That night he feasted on boiled carrots and potatoes. The piping hot potatoes were a delicious addition to his current diet. He was full, and when it got dark he naturally got sleepy. He curled up on the futon that he'd aired out during the day and closed his eyes. He planned on boiling down sea water the next day to make salt because with salt, the food would taste even better.

Yuichi yawned widely. Separating from Imakura had been the best thing that had happened since he'd gotten here. He should have done it earlier, and mocked himself for putting up with his boss as long as he did.

The next morning before dawn, Yuichi headed straight for the dock. When he got there he hoisted the message flag he'd made the day before onto a rusted light post. On his way back he glanced towards Imakura's chosen house but he didn't detect any sound or movement. He spent the rest of the morning on the porch looking out over the waves. Around 9:00, he saw the enormous figure sitting on the dock as Imakura began his daily watch. The sky was clear and blue, birds chirped, and the sea was calm, but there was no boat to be seen on the horizon.

Yuichi got hungry in the afternoon so he returned to the field. While digging for potatoes he heard

a sound and turned to see grey rabbit hopping away. That night, he repaired the hole in a large bamboo cage that he'd found earlier and ignored. It was so flimsy that he wondered if it would work, but he was able to catch a rabbit with it. He wasted no time roasting it over a fire. Even without spices, this was the first meat he'd eaten in a long time and nothing he'd eaten before had tasted better. As he ate, Imakura's face floated in his mind and he wondered what Imakura could be eating. In view of their recent difficulties, he told himself not to think about him and hardened his heart.

Several days passed. He would watch for boats in the mornings and search for food in the afternoons. It didn't take long for Yuichi's life to form a pattern. He found that instead of eating the rabbits immediately after catching them it was better to keep them and feed them until he needed the food. He used a birdcage from another house to house them. There were still a lot of carrots and potatoes in the large field so food was abundant. Once he realized he no longer had to worry about food things got easier and it merely became a time of waiting.

On the seventh day of being left behind Yuichi made his usual meal of carrots and potatoes. Then, map in hand, he hiked to the highest point on the island. The hill was not that tall and the walk only took an hour. From this vantage point, he could see far out over the ocean. The wind was strong, and he brushed the hair from his face as he looked over the water that seemed to stretch forever. He thought about building a raft to escape the island but then he remembered the fisherman talking

about how the changing currents made the waters in this area so dangerous. Instead of taking the risk it would be better to wait for someone to come get them.

"I wonder why no one has come..." He didn't mean to speak aloud, but the words escaped his mouth. He noticed that he'd been talking to himself more and more over the past several days. One week had passed since they'd been left on the island. Why weren't they looking for him? Why hadn't they come? What had kept them from coming? Wasn't his family worried about him? Yuichi shook his head and felt very alone. He reminded himself to keep a positive attitude and started to head down the hill.

He passed by the dock on his way back but Imakura wasn't there. He peeked through the garden of the house but saw no one. Imakura did have water, and even if he had no food for a few days, he must have had enough fat stored in that enormous body of his. There was no way he would have simply died. He probably just got tired of keeping watch.

Returning home, Yuichi made soup with a rabbit he'd caught and added carrots and potatoes. This time he flavored it with salt. But as soon as he sipped the soup, Imakura's fat face popped up in his mind. He started to worry if Imakura had found anything to eat but then remembered how he had smashed the carrot with his foot and chastised himself for worrying about someone who didn't deserve it.

That night, he had trouble sleeping. His mind wavered between thoughts of why no one had come to rescue them and when rescuers would arrive. The solitude

and quiet of the surroundings only fanned the flames of his thoughts. Uneasiness mixed with loneliness, and even though he had gotten a lot of exercise on his hike, he couldn't fall asleep.

The first thing Yuichi did each morning when he woke up was to make a mark on a pillar. Today he made his eighth mark as he had been here eight days. He followed his morning routine by washing his face and then wondered what he would do today. He already had a supply of carrots and potatoes and he was holding another rabbit he'd trapped. He even had leftover soup from yesterday, enough so that he wouldn't have to forage for food for a few days.

"I guess I'll start by eating." Again he spoke out loud as he started a fire under the fire stand. He heated up the leftover soup and poured it into a bowl he had scavenged from next door.

"This is pretty good." There was no one to answer. This was probably the longest he had ever gone without talking to someone else.

"I wonder if he's eaten anything." Yuichi sighed. He'd eaten everything in the bowl, but there was still another helping left in the pot. Guilt ate at him just like he ate his food.

"I doubt he's eaten anything good."

He stared at the soup in the pot.

"I haven't seen him since yesterday."

Again he doubted that Imakura was dead but Yuichi became more worried the moment he had that thought. At one point he had seriously thought

about killing the man, but if Imakura actually died, he would never be able to forgive himself. Not if he had food and hadn't shared. Finally, he picked up the pot. He rationalized that in his loneliness he'd only keep worrying about Imakura if he didn't see him. But the truth was he wanted someone to talk to and he didn't care whom. He could say 'hello,' give him some soup, ignore his abuse, and come back.

When he arrived at Imakura's house a quarter mile down by the shore the place was very still. He was pretty sure Imakura was in the house because he hadn't gone to the dock, but he might have gone off in search of food. But if he wasn't there, he wasn't there. Yuichi knocked on the door.

"Hello."

There was no answer. Yuichi turned, thinking Imakura must be out, but then he heard moaning from within. He threw the door open to check inside.

The room was dark even during the day. There was something round laying on the futon inside and it was groaning. Imakura was lying on his stomach with only his head facing Yuichi. His face was white and his lips were pale. The second Imakura saw Yuichi, his red eyes welled up in tears and he started sobbing uncontrollably.

"What happened?" Yuichi hurried to him. The pig's face was now covered in tears and snot, and his words where shaky as they passed his colorless lips.

"My stomach...it won't stop hurting. And I have diarrhea."

A tear fell on Yuichi's hand.

"It hurts so much..."

He was rolled up into a ball, and even though he was a big man, he shook like a small animal. Looking at this pitiful sight, Yuichi couldn't help but regret that he hadn't come earlier. He could have done something to ease his pain.

"What did you do? Did you drink too much water? Or eat something bad?"

"I was so hungry...I ate..."

"I can't hear you. What did you eat?"

"I ate grass and my stomach..."

Yuichi was shocked when he heard the word "grass."

"I was so hungry and couldn't stop myself..."

Imakura cried hard. While Yuichi was enjoying his rabbit, the man who'd once crushed a carrot he'd refused to eat had fallen so far that he was forced to eat grass from the garden. And now here he was standing over the crying man brought so low by hunger. It was then he remembered what few supplies the team had brought ashore for their trip included some company-provided goods.

"Wait! That's right! I have something. You recall those portable first aid kits the company created that didn't sell well? I think it has some stomach medicine. I'll go get it."

But as he was about to go, Imakura grabbed his right wrist.

"Don't...don't go."

Yuichi paused when he saw Imakura's fevered expression.

"I'm just going to get the medicine."
Imakura shook his head wildly.

"Don't. You might not come back. You won't help me, and I will die alone in this godforsaken place. I don't want that to happen."

"I won't leave you to die."

But Imakura's grip got even tighter.

"But you hate me. You hate me enough to punch me." Imakura started to bawl again. "I don't want to be alone. Not any more. I don't want to die here."

Yuichi understood his fear. Even he had grown lonely and he had been well. But no matter how many times he tried to assure Imakura the man would not listen. Instead of feeling sympathy, Yuichi grew angry again at his childish behavior.

"Just shut up. And stop crying." When he yelled at Imakura the man stopped crying immediately just like an obedient child. Now that Yuichi had shattered his emotionless exterior there was no reason to hold back.

"I said I was just going to get the medicine. Let go of me. If you don't, then I really won't come back."

Imakura let go but slowly and reluctantly. He looked at Yuichi with red, watery eyes. This made it hard for Yuichi to leave, but he needed the medicine if he was to help the man. Yuichi ran the half mile round trip at full speed. When he returned, the relief was clear on Imakura's face. He wiped his nose with his hand. Since taking the medicine on an empty stomach might just upset the fat man's stomach even more, Yuichi suggested that Imakura have some of the soup. Even though he had diarrhea, it was not enough to overcome

his extreme hunger, and when he saw the soup he could not hold back. He looked like was going to drink it all in one gulp. Yuichi told him to slow down, and threatened to not share again unless he did. Imakura obeyed and took his time drinking the rest. After eating and taking the medicine, Imakura laid down on the futon.

“Feeling any better?”

Imakura nodded and said, “Yes” just like a child.

“Once the medicine kicks in, your diarrhea will stop.”

“OK”, Imakura answered gently.

Seeing his boss all weak and obedient Yuichi couldn't help but think that Imakura might have had a cute side once. A single shake of Yuichi's head threw that thought out. If eating grass brought on the diarrhea, he would check on Imakura in the morning and give him something easier to digest. Imakura kept gazing at Yuichi from the futon and his staring was embarrassing. Yuichi stood up and Imakura excitedly got up too.

“Are you leaving?” he asked quietly.

“I'm just going to the bathroom.”

“Oh...”

The fat man relaxed and laid down again. When Yuichi left the room he noticed an odor coming from the kitchen. He peeked into a pot that seemed to be the source of the smell and found small brown objects floating in a foul concoction. When he thought of Imakura eating this he became even sadder. He returned from the toilet with a heavy heart to find Imakura sobbing heavily having crawled under the futon.

"Why is this happening to me? What did I do to deserve this? I want my mommy. Mama..."

Yuichi's skin crawled hearing this.

"Come out here", he yelled, and Imakura crawled out from the futon. Yuichi stuck his index finger against the man's red nose.

"Listen. It's not normal for a man in his thirties to say 'mama'. It just shows how much of a mama's boy you are. You have to stop relying on her and stand up on your own. I used to wonder why you were so irresponsible, but now I know why. You are completely dependent on your mother. You need to take responsibility for yourself."

Imakura bit his lip and grasped the futon with his fat fingers as he spoke. "I am self-dependent. I have a salary..."

Yuichi pounded the tatami mat. Imakura jumped at the sound.

"It's not a problem of money. It has to do with psychology."

Imakura pouted in silence, but looked like he wanted to say something.

"I was always sick when I was young. That is why mama still worries about me. Even I've felt she goes too far sometimes..."

At least he realized his problem.

"First, you have to become independent of your mother. Don't rely on anyone but yourself. Learn to control your actions. You are mentally lazy and that's why you're so fat."

But when he heard the word 'fat' Imakura's

expression hardened.

"You're a man now, but you still gobble down chocolate..."

The moment he said 'chocolate' Imakura started to break down. For the first time he must have realized how much his hoarding had hurt Yuichi and this made him crawl back into safety of the futon again.

Imakura found the courage to speak suddenly.

"My image of you has changed completely over these past few days. I used to think you were a nicer person. I didn't know you were so coarse and ill-mannered."

Yuichi laughed when he heard the muffled voice from the futon speaking these words.

"This is the real me. Spending time with a spoiled fool like you has broken down the façade I tried so hard to create", Yuichi snorted. "So...how did your first knuckle sandwich taste? Did it hurt? Good. That means you won't go against me again. This is a serious situation. We're alone, obviously abandoned and there's no reason to stand on ceremony. If you do something I don't like, I'll pound some sense into you."

Imakura went white and pulled his head further into the futon. Yuichi slapped his round back while laughing.

"I'm just kidding. I won't hit you unless you act spoiled."

Imakura slowly pulled his head out of the futon and checked Yuichi's expression to see if he really meant what he said. Yuichi bonked him on the forehead with his outstretched hand and the chubby giant shuddered.

"You don't have a fever. Your stomach pain should clear up soon too."

He turned when he heard the sound of something falling softly on the roof. In a sudden burst it had started to rain. It was coming down steadily enough to obscure the view outside. It had been clear a few minutes ago, and the rain was a grim reminder of just how quickly the weather could change on the island. He had an umbrella but thinking it wouldn't rain, he didn't bring it with him.

"It's raining...I'm going to go back to my place before it gets too heavy."

Imakura stood the second he said this.

"You're going to leave your sick companion behind?" He shook his head wildly side to side. "What if I suddenly take a turn for the worse and die?"

Yuichi didn't take kindly to these dramatics.

"If you are healthy enough to talk like that, there's no way you are going to die."

"No. Don't go." Imakura's desperate tone made Yuichi pause but he knew that he couldn't give in or else today's lessons would be lost.

"Please...please stay," Imakura said in a lonely tone. "I'm afraid when I'm alone. There is nothing here, and no one to talk to..."

Yuichi was shocked to hear someone who had only given him orders or abuse in the past say 'please' to him. Even though he knew that he shouldn't encourage him he was touched by the pitiful figure before him. He understood his loneliness. After all, he had only checked on Imakura because he wanted someone's company--

anyone's. Outside, the rainfall increased. He knew he would have nothing to do once he got back to his own house. He gave up on the idea of leaving. When Imakura asked, "Are you staying," he answered "Yes."

The stress on Imakura's face disappeared and he laid down on the futon. Within thirty minutes he was asleep and breathing lightly like a gentle animal. Yuichi gazed out the window at the rain. Now that Imakura was asleep it was like he was alone again. Still, there was someone here with him, so technically he was not alone. That thought cheered him up even if that companion was someone he thought he hated. Suddenly, he shivered. It was a little chilly. He closed the door as well as the window, but this made the room extremely dark. He laid down on the tatami. The only sound was that of the falling rain. He thought this must be the first time he had just sat quietly and listened to the rain. He rolled over and his back began to hurt. He went to the closet to get the futon he had been using but it wasn't there. Not only that all the futons were gone except the one that Imakura was using.

"What did he do with them...?" The sound of Yuichi's voice must have awakened him because Imakura turned his head.

"What happened to all of the futons?"

"I soiled them so I threw them out." Imakura answered as if talking in his sleep.

Yuichi tried to imagine how bad they must have been for the pitiful pig to dispose of them. Had he vomited on them or was it something else? He thought it best not to ask for details.

"Did you want a futon?"

"I would like one, but I can sleep on the tatami if I have to."

Even before he finished, Imakura had crawled out of his own futon.

"You can have this one."

"Then you won't have anywhere to sleep."

"I don't need it."

It was an amazing offer from a man who just a few days ago wouldn't even give up a piece of chocolate. He was willing to go this far to make sure that Yuichi didn't leave. Still, Yuichi was not that base. He couldn't take the futon from someone who was feeling so bad.

"I'm fine. You take it."

"No, you."

Neither would give any ground. Half joking, Yuichi suggested, "Okay then, let's sleep together."

"Fine with me." Without pause, Imakura returned to the futon, but stayed well to one side. The empty half stood out in a strange way. Yuichi had been the one to suggest it, and it wouldn't look good if he refused now. He got in with Imakura but it wasn't comfortable. If Imakura had known he was gay, would he have invited him in so easily? Yuichi didn't think so. He couldn't help but be relieved that Imakura was a 300 pound behemoth. He liked thin, handsome young men and Imakura was the exact opposite. If he were more normal-sized and had a better personality, Yuichi might be tempted to break his period of forced celibacy. He thought about the men he had slept with...even the one-night stands. Each and every one was thin and they

all had boyish faces. He had friends who were chubby chasers, and spoke passionately of the joys of fat, but Yuichi had never understood the attraction.

Yuichi breathed in. There was a sweet, acrid odor that made his heart jump. It was almost like the sweet odor of a child. He breathed in deeper, hoping to get a better whiff. He tried to stop himself, chiding himself that this was Imakura he was smelling, but he could not deny the strange attraction. Then he started to notice little things, like the warmth of the huge back he was pressed against. He didn't want to be so close, but there was only so far he could get from Imakura's massive body without falling completely off the futon.

Despite their dire situation, he couldn't help but think that the damage done to their relationship would not be repaired that easily. He noticed that Imakura's breathing had become regular. He got up gently and looked down on his sleeping face. The more he thought about it, the more he felt he would be able to calm the anger that Imakura had caused. His face was not that bad. That was the judgment of a fair mind. No, no. Just look at that quadruple chin. There are four of them...four! But if he lost weight, he wouldn't be bad looking. Unable to suppress his curiosity, Yuichi touched one of the folds of the chin with his finger. Imakura's eyes opened wide.

"What?"

"Uh...um...there was something..."

He pulled his finger back in haste.

"I'm tired because I kept having to get up to go to the bathroom last night."

His half open eyes showed his displeasure as he turned his head. Yuichi rubbed his finger. Imakura's skin had been very, very soft. He liked it. He wondered if just his chin was this way, or if his whole body was as well. He heard himself gulp.

Yuichi laid down again, and pretending to move he touched Imakura's arm. Though the skin was milky white, his fat arm resembled a boneless ham. Still, it was soft and seemed like a pillow for his finger. Yuichi had had sex with many men but this was the first time he had experienced skin that felt so good. If his whole body was covered with skin like this...he gulped again. He wondered how it would feel to hold his naked body.

His head was filled with dangerous thoughts. Was he insane? Who did he think this man was? This was Imakura. The obese monster Imakura. How could he even think about lustng after him? Yuichi put his head in his hands. His dignity was at stake. He had to purge these thoughts by making Imakura even less desirable. Using his imagination, he formed an image of a naked Imakura in his head. He gave him five chins, and an even larger belly like a figurine of the Buddha. He had never seen his crotch, but he made it small based on the rumors he'd heard. He thought this would do the trick, but...even though he normally wouldn't give Imakura a second look, in his mind, he imagined throwing himself at Imakura.

"Hey, I'm not a chubby chaser." No matter how many times he told himself so, in his imagination he was lifting Imakura's legs and inserting his cock into Imakura's tight ass.



Yuichi hurriedly got up and stumbled outside. He went behind the house and dropped his pants. Still fantasizing about pounding Imakura, he came twice. His penis, pointing straight towards the heavens, looked sad in the rain. He had no principles. He was not normal. These were dire circumstances...he tried to the calm himself as he returned inside. Imakura was deep asleep. His mouth was half open and he was snoring slightly. He looked fat and defenseless just like a newborn. Yuichi scared himself when he thought how cute Imakura looked. "No...no he's not...not at all". And yet he couldn't take his eyes off him. He could not repress his desire either. Yuichi touched Imakura's arm again. It was so soft that he did not want to stop. Imakura's eyes opened slightly, but he didn't seem to notice and closed them again.

The rain stopped later that evening, and while Imakura slept, Yuichi returned to his own house. When he came back the next morning, Imakura was up and about. He was smiling and said that his stomach no longer hurt and the medicine had worked well. Yuichi brought steamed potatoes and salt which made Imakura's eyes sparkle. He ate them like they were the most delicious food in the world and his childish delight brought a smile to Yuichi's face. He found himself gazing at Imakura, but then felt uncomfortable when he became aware of the fact. When he was finished eating, Imakura laid down like a sated cat.

"Imakura."

"What is it?" The large man didn't get up but

just turned his head.

"A week has passed since we were left behind. At first we thought someone would come right away but that hasn't happened. We don't know why, but we have to do our best to get by until someone does come."

Imakura rose and nodded with a serious expression and so Yuichi went on.

"We can't have you becoming suddenly ill again. These are unusual circumstances, and if we are going to live together, we are going to have to help each other out."

"I agree." The answer was quick and positive, a change that made Yuichi pause. He cleared his throat and continued.

"If we're going to live together we should split up chores. I'll search for food and while I'm out you can cook and clean here."

"You want me to cook?" Imakura's eyes narrowed once more, and his brow wrinkled. "Mama always said that men do not belong in the kitchen."

"Okay. You can search for food then. That's fine with me."

Imakura shook his head. Even he knew that he wasn't cut out for such labor.

Now came the important part. Yuichi put his hands on his hips.

"From now on, I'll be the leader."

Imakura was caught off guard and frowned.

"Are you saying I have to follow your orders?"

Yuichi laughed.

"I'm not you, so I won't say anything that doesn't make sense. If you don't like it, I won't live with you. We'll split up and take care of our own needs like we have been."

Imakura could hardly refuse--he did not have the ability to make it on his own.

This was the beginning of their second attempt at living together and it got off to a good start. Once Yuichi asserted his dominance Imakura showed little resistance. They decided they would live in the house that Yuichi had been using because it was in better shape. Once they decided on chores Imakura worked harder. He was not happy with the prospect of cooking (he had never even held a knife before) but once he got used to it, he found that he was good at it. He learned to use salt and herbs for flavor and even had a talent for arranging food in an appetizing way on the plate. He did have a bad habit of munching in between meals but Yuichi pretended not to notice because he didn't want to seem like he was harping.

Once they got used to life on the island the nights became tedious. They found candles and that allowed them to stay up later. But with no television or radio the nights seemed very long. Then Imakura found a deck of cards in the house. They played cards by candlelight to pass the time and when they got tired of that they talked.

"Papa died in a car accident when I was young. That's why mama never wanted me to get a license. I don't mind being driven around by others but I want to try it myself sometime." Imakura no longer acted like he

was the boss and was more like a naïve schoolboy.

"That's your mother talking. If you want a license then you should get one. Even if your father did die in an accident that doesn't mean that you will. As long as you follow safety rules and don't speed you shouldn't get into an accident."

Imakura could not hide his pleasure.

"Really? I've always wanted to drive, but she would never let me. When we get back I'm going to tell her that I want a license."

"You don't need her permission. You can get one if you want. You're an adult. You can make your own decisions."

Imakura looked down and was silent.

"Think about it. Parents usually die before their children. If your mother died and you couldn't make decisions, what would you do?"

"Don't talk like that!" Imakura pursed his lips and turned his back. He always did this when he didn't like something. It was no use trying to talk to someone with such a habit. If Yuichi let it go Imakura's mood would improve by the morning.

"How come you're so much more mature than me even though you're younger. It makes me angry," blurted Imakura.

"I'm normal. It's just that you're a spoiled and a mama's boy."

Imakura turned red with embarrassment.

"Whether it was school or work I've never made my own decisions. I've always done what mama wanted me to. But everything worked out. Mama even

decided that I should get a job with our company." The more the man talked the more he confirmed his dependence on his mother.

"Didn't you ever have dreams about what you wanted to be when you grew up?"

Imakura didn't answer right away and seemed reluctant to say anything. Their single candle sputtered on a drop of moisture.

"I like wine...and there was a time I wanted to be a sommelier. I told mama, but she said I should forget about such unstable work."

"That's a bad rap. Even if your mother objected you still should have gone ahead with your dream. You don't really like your current job, do you?"

Imakura was shocked when confronted with this hard truth.

"People can tell just by working with you that your heart's not in it. That is why no one likes you."

"No one...?" Imakura was obviously hurt and maybe a little stunned.

Yuichi hesitated. He didn't know if he should tell Imakura what the others had said about him. He didn't want to hurt him more but it could be constructive..."

"A lot of people don't like you. Do you know why?

"Because I'm fat?"

Yuichi chuckled then stifled it thinking he had better explain.

"That's only secondary. You never apologize when you make a mistake. You always blame someone else. Yet when someone else makes a mistake you berate

them. You're the classic example of someone who is too easy on themselves and too hard on others. Nobody wants a boss like that."

There was only the two of them and Imakura had nowhere to flee but he seemed to want to. He stared down at the ground and bit his lip.

"Even if you weren't that good at work if you put your entire effort into it there would be people who would follow you. If you won't even do that you'll get no respect. That's how it is now. But you can take this opportunity to change. Remember the golden rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Before you speak, think how your words will affect the person. If you do these things, your reputation will improve markedly."

Something plopped on the tatami mat. Imakura seemed deep in thought. Yuichi must have hit a nerve. Imakura was not unaware of his problems, and when pointed out so clearly, he was filled with regret and the tears followed.

"There's no need to cry."

Seeing his boss weep in silence Yuichi felt like going over and holding him. He wanted to comfort him and tell him not to cry.

"Perhaps my words were too rough. I'm sorry."

"How dare you? I'm older than you," sobbed Imakura. His tears were uncontrollable as he wiped his nose with a sleeve.

"It may hurt you to say so, but you don't act older than me. You're more like a younger brother."

Yuichi placed his hand on Imakura's head even though it felt strange to do so. After gently rubbing it a few times he touched his chin. The skin was soft and felt nice and he rubbed it like he would the chin of a cat. The look in Imakura's eyes told him that this was uncomfortable so Yuichi pulled his fingers back with a jerk and chuckled.

"You don't have much of a beard. There's hardly any hair there at all." This was the only excuse he would come up with for touching him. Imakura agreed as he touched his chin himself.

"There is hardly anything there. You have quite a beard going though."

"That's because I haven't shaved in ten days..."

Yuichi brought his hand to his unkempt beard. Even he was turned off by its roughness but there wasn't much he could do. They hadn't found anything even resembling a razor.

"I've always wanted an unkempt beard like that. I don't have much body hair and it makes me sad when I see myself naked. What I really want is a good patch of chest hair or hair on my legs."

When Yuichi heard him say he didn't have much hair he wondered if he had any down there. He imagined soft tufts similar to the hair on his head, soft like that of a cat, and found himself aroused. He stepped away from the candle to hide his blushing.

"Um...shall we go to bed? We shouldn't waste the candle."

Imakura nodded, so they blew out the candle

and got into the futon. Yuichi prayed that their boat would come soon. This was getting to be too dangerous. And what was in danger? Imakura's virginity.

Shuji Higashiyama traveled to the port of Hamamatsu to search for his brother who had now been missing for two weeks. Accompanying him was Yoshie Imakura the mother of his brother's boss. Two weeks earlier, his brother's company had gone bankrupt. Shortly afterwards, Shuji, who had moved out of their house after getting married and now lived with his pregnant wife, received a call from their parents saying that Yuichi hadn't been home for five days. Yuichi frequently traveled for business and it was not uncommon for him to be gone for two or three days without saying anything. Yet this time he had told them about the trip but he hadn't said where he would be going. Shuji tried calling his company but no one would talk to him. He even went in person. The woman there said that the travel slip was on top and noted that he had gone to "Okinawa." Shuji took time off from work to fly to Okinawa but there was no sign of his brother there. This convinced him that he should make a missing persons report to the police as soon as possible.

Returning from the failed trip, he met Yoshie for the first time. She had also gone to Okinawa to search for her son but came back without any clues to his whereabouts either. In desperation she decided to visit the home of the person her son was traveling with. Shuji hadn't known that Yuichi's boss was missing as well. His male boss, he noted. He was getting a bad

feeling about this. Perhaps his parents were having the same thought because when his eyes met theirs he could see their worry. He wanted to ask if her son was gay also and if there was any chance they had run off together. But he just couldn't bring himself to speak the words as she cried into her handkerchief. Comparing their stories, they determined that there was no way they had gone to Okinawa, so Shuji went to his brother's company again. Most of the staff had been laid off the same day the bankruptcy was announced and the building was nearly empty. Shuji searched for his brother's travel slip among a stack of papers and discovered that the Okinawa trip had been last year. This time he had gone to Fuchi Island to search for herbs.

Shuji traveled to Hamamatsu with Yoshie where they learned that a fisherman in his fifties had taken the two to the island. They talked to the man when he returned from a day of fishing, and he confirmed that he had taken two men out to Fuchi Island two weeks ago. They thought they had finally gotten to the bottom of the mystery, but were disappointed to find out that this man had only taken them; someone else had picked them up. Now they had to search for this other fisherman. They asked at the fisherman's guild, and learned the name and address of this other man. They went to his house right away, but something was not right. There was a "mourning" sign on the front door. They peeked inside and were led in by two middle-aged women. There they saw a brand new Buddhist altar, and a black and white photo of the late Genzo Ikenohata staring down at them. One of the women, his daughter, brought a finger to her eyes.

"It was five days ago. He came back from a day of fishing, laid down, and never got up. The doctor said he was in no pain."

Shuji sat in shock, but they couldn't leave just yet, even though Genzo could not answer their questions. He had to see if they had any information.

"So do you know if Genzo went to the island to pick up two employees of a pharmaceutical company two weeks ago?"

His daughter thought for a second.

"They should know at the guild. I'll ask."

She called the guild.

"The woman there seems to remember your brother." She gave the phone to Shuji, who spoke to Tae Yoshiwara.

"Oh, the pharmaceutical people. I got a call saying the boat was late. I called Genzo on the radio and he said he had them on board and was heading back. That means they made it back to port."

Shuji hung up and found Yoshie looking at him expectantly.

"She said they came back from the island. Now we know that they disappeared after that."

"Then where did they go?"

"Um..."

Genzo's daughter shyly cut in.

"I just remembered that my father said once they got back to port he dropped them off at the train station on the way to his friend's house. I'm sure that's what he said."

"Hamamatsu Station?"

Now they could trace them to the station but then where? Shuji could not erase the fear that they had run off together. But what he didn't know was that Genzo had picked up the ornithologists and dropped them off at the station. His brother and his boss were still stuck on the deserted island.

That day, Yuichi came up with a plan first thing in the morning. He wanted to take a bath. The abandoned house had a bath and he had wanted to try it. It was a similar to a large black kettle a type of bath common in the countryside. You put in water and then lit a fire under it to heat it. Yuichi cleaned the bath in the morning and then he filled it with water from the well. He placed firewood that he had been gathering underneath and lit it.

In about an hour the water was hot enough. Putting in his hand he found the water to be just right. He was so excited he went out to the kitchen and pulled Imakura to the bathroom without saying a word. Imakura was surprised--Yuichi hadn't told him about his plan--and he jumped with joy.

"Yuichi, you're awesome!"

Yuichi was sure that would be his reaction. Imakura was a clean freak. He would take soap they had found out to the well each night to wash his hands and feet and used a cloth to get as much of the rest of his body as he could. It had been two weeks but Yuichi was still surprised by the amount of dirt that came off his body. After washing clean he spent a luxurious time in the tub. He emerged in his underwear and found Imakura

grilling rabbit meat, carrots, and peppers on sticks over the fire.

"I'll take care of the rest. Why don't you get in the bath."

Imakura's eyes lit up at the sound of the word 'bath'. The large man disappeared inside, but after a short time, Yuichi heard a yelp from the bathroom. He hurried to find out what happened and found Imakura rolled up in a ball on the floor naked.

"What happened?"

"It was hot...it burned me!"

Yuichi plunged his hand into the water but found the temperature to be just right.

"It's not that hot."

"Not the water. My feet. My feet got burned."

Yuichi understood when he looked in the bath. Since you burned firewood right under the bath, and that made the bottom very hot. You usually put a wooden plank on the bottom to protect yourself, but since they didn't have one, Yuichi had jerry-rigged a few pieces of wood to stand on. Imakura hadn't understood why the boards were in there and so took them out.

"You need planks on the bottom. I guess you didn't know when you got in. I'm sorry."

Yuichi returned the boards to the bottom.

"Stand on these and your feet won't burn."

Imakura got up slowly, and cautiously looked at the bottom of the tub. That was the first time Yuichi realized he was with a naked man. The second he noticed, he couldn't take his eyes off of Imakura's white skin. Even though he was fat and wrinkled, his skin was

white and clear. His ass looked softer than any he had ever seen and Yuichi had to keep himself from grabbing it. Yuichi gulped, and then dipped his head slightly so he could peek at Imakura's crotch...he was surprised at what he saw.

Imakura's member was so small it made him doubt it could even function properly. It was no exaggeration to say that it was no bigger than Yuichi's thumb and his balls were so small that they resembled quail eggs. He had heard rumors that Imakura had a small dick, but he'd never imagined that it was this small. It would be okay for a child but Yuichi had only seen such small ones on adults in magazines. To make it even worse, Imakura's mini-penis was uncircumcised and possibly phimotic.

When Imakura plopped in the water Yuichi came out of his trance. He went out back, threw down his pants, and gripped his throbbing cock. He could not get the sight of that small, uncircumcised penis out of his head, and had to come three times while standing just to satisfy his urges. As he did so, he noticed a burning smell. As he was jerking off, the rabbit meat burned.

Imakura drew water and started a fire each night for the bath. Since Yuichi enjoyed the smell of fresh soap while sitting with Imakura he became painfully aware that he was gay and Imakura was not. The devil on his shoulder whispered that they were on a deserted island. Nobody would know if they touched each other and screwed. Still, Imakura was straight, not gay. He did not want to confront that fact. He just

wanted to touch him, to caress him. Since he didn't have anything to take his mind off of it, every night he was bombarded with fantasies, and Yuichi found himself in a living hell of sexual arousal and denial. It would've been better if Imakura had remained his selfish boss. But Yuichi had already come to see him as cute and gentle. Plus, with their forced diet and regular exercise, Imakura had started to lose a little weight. Yuichi was surprised to find himself thinking his companion was somewhat charming once he became used to the routine.

"This is not good," Yuichi muttered as he drank his rabbit soup.

Since he'd seen Imakura's penis, he just couldn't stop imagining himself sucking it. Each day, the desire to touch it, to blow it, got stronger and stronger.

"Is something wrong," Imakura asked from across the room with a mouth full of potatoes. He had no idea that he'd become Yuichi's jerk off fantasy. "Are you worried that we're running out of food?"

The words were a good insight into Imakura's priorities but Yuichi laughed and said that wasn't the case. As if relieved by Yuichi's answer, Imakura sipped at his rabbit soup again. From time to time as he sipped the tip of his tongue would show. Yuichi could not take his eyes off this, and when he noticed, Yuichi started to gulp down his own soup to hide his behavior.

"I'm going for a walk." Yuichi stood and Imakura looked at him curiously.

"There is no moon tonight. It's dark."

This didn't stop Yuichi, who said that he would not be long.

"You really like walking. You go out every night."

Yuichi heard Imakura as he was leaving and had to laugh. Walking down the path in the dark, Yuichi came to a small field and crouched. He took his penis and rubbed it frantically. Of course his mind was on the man sipping soup back at the house. He fantasized raping Imakura from the front, back, and every other position. It's not that he liked walks. If he didn't get off there was no way he could sleep. He didn't even jerk off this much in high school. When he realized that, he couldn't help but be ashamed by his obsession. When he got back the house was dark. They had candles but they were running out so they only used them when they had to. Imakura must be in his futon because he could see the large mound inside.

Yuichi got into his own futon right next to him.

"You're not feeling well?"

Yuichi was surprised to hear these words because he thought Imakura had been asleep.

"You sigh a lot recently. If you are worried about something I wish you would talk about it. All I can do is listen, but..."

Imakura had never shown concern for the feelings of others before, and Yuichi was surprised at how perceptive he was. Even though he said he would listen, Yuichi couldn't very well tell him that his passion was getting the best of him. He knew Imakura would mock him. They may be alone but he wanted to avoid that at all costs.

"It's not important."

"I hope so..."

Their conversation ended there but Yuichi wanted to talk a little longer. He could have asked anything but he surprised even himself at the subject he chose. He couldn't see his companion's face in the dark and that is probably why he was able to broach the subject.

"Do you still have your foreskin? I just happened to see when you were getting in the bath. It looked like your thing was covered with skin."

There was the sound of movement caused by discomfort. Imakura started to stutter something and then fell silent. The silence was uncomfortable, and just as Yuichi was starting to regret ever bringing it up, Imakura whispered, "Please don't tell anyone. I think I'm phimotic."

There was only the two of them and thus no reason to whisper but they continued their conversation in subdued voices.

"Is it false?"

"...I don't know, but it doesn't even come out when I have an erection, and when I try to force it, it hurts. It must be positive."

"These days they do corrective surgery even on boys in high school. Have you ever considered it?"

"Mama holds onto my insurance card. I'm too embarrassed to ask for it so I can get the surgery."

His heart was yelling at him to stop but Yuichi could not hold back his curiosity. He jumped out of his futon and approached Imakura.

"Let me try."

"Try what?" Imakura's voice was already high for a man, but it went even higher.

"Pulling back the skin. Didn't you do this with your friends in high school? Give me a chance to see if I can pull back the skin with my hand."

"Uh... That's okay. Really. It's dirty..."

"You just took a bath. It'll be fine."

Yuichi lit the candle that he'd put next to his pillow in case of an emergency. The room brightened with the yellowish orange flame. Imakura would not come out of his futon saying that they didn't have to do this.

"There is nothing to be ashamed of. We're both men. When I was in junior high we used to pull it out in front of each other all the time."

"You did?" Imakura peeked out of the futon. His eyes showed his surprise.

"That's normal. When you're in junior high you get curious of how you measure up to everyone else. When there was someone with phimosis we'd pull the skin off." Yuichi was convincing, but of course he was lying. He had never done any such thing. He couldn't have. He would have gotten a hard on just by looking at the penises of others.

"Everyone was doing it...? It was normal. I never knew..." There was a tinge of regret in Imakura's voice.

"If you let me pull back the skin there's no need to go to the hospital. Surgery can be embarrassing for men of any age."

Imakura came out of the futon and sat holding his knees.

“Do you really think it’s a good idea?”

“Of course. Junior high kids do it.”

That seemed to be all it took. Imakura looked convinced.

“OK then...if you don’t mind...would you please peel the skin back?”

Even as he celebrated his success Yuichi’s conscience still nagged him.

“You’ve seen it once, so you know what it looks like, but please don’t laugh.”

Leaning forward, Imakura slid down his underwear. By the yellow candlelight, the small, uncircumcised, simple penis that Yuichi had seen in the bath was visible again. Despite the disappointing visual, Yuichi’s fingers became hot with excitement. He was glad he had come three times before going to bed. If not, he’d already be erect and unable to move. He acted as casual as possible, but his hands shook with excitement as he touched Imakura’s penis. It was light, maybe like a child’s, and very soft. It was cute that it seemed so feeble. He held the penis in his left hand while pulling the skin with his right. Though he could see the very tip there was no indication that the rest would come out.

“It is too difficult when it’s soft. Let’s try to get you erect.”

“No...please don’t.” Imakura tried to pull back, but Yuichi didn’t let him.

“Why don’t you lie on your back and spread your legs?”

Imakura resisted but still did what he was told. He lay down and opened his legs wide in a position that seemed to be begging for Yuichi to take him then and there. Yuichi's crotch throbbed even though it should have nothing left to give. He did not speak further. He was in heaven as he pulled and rubbed Imakura's penis and cupped his balls. He ached to take it into his mouth, but that would be going a little too far, so he held himself back. Imakura's penis responded immediately to his caressing. It was still small, but hard and it stood up straight. Though the tip could not break through the skin, moistness started to leak from its small hole.

"I'm going to pull the skin now. It might hurt a little."

After giving this warning, Yuichi pulled the thin skin back hard with his fingers.

"Ow!"

The sensitive tip began to shudder.

"It hurts. Please stop. Let's not do this anymore."

Yuichi's fingers were covered with moistness.

"Just a little more and we'll have it."

"But it really hurts."

Yuichi held Imakura's hips to keep him from escaping, and brought his body between Imakura's legs. He began pulling even harder now that he was sure that Imakura couldn't get away or close his legs. The skin broke and it bled a little. Even so, the tip of his penis was only a third visible. He lifted his head when he heard sobbing and saw that Imakura was crying into his hands.

"Oh...sorry..."

He couldn't go on hurting him. Blood was flowing where the skin had been halfway pulled back, and without thinking, Yuichi put his lips where it formed a drop. Imakura's hips shook.

"You're bleeding. I'm trying to disinfect it...."

Though completely unnecessary, he used it as an excuse to take Imakura's penis into his mouth. He wrapped his tongue around it and sucked. Though the penis was small in his mouth, he could clearly feel it stiffen.

"It hurts...ow..." Imakura cried more and his hips shook as if becoming erect was aggravating the wound. Yuichi sucked harder, and suddenly his mouth was filed with a familiar odor. He swallowed the semen happily. It was thick and there was a slight taste of blood. When he realized that not only had he performed fellatio, he had swallowed the result, Yuichi broke into a cold sweat. It might be one thing to strip in front of others but blowjobs were a little outside of normal activity. Still, he knew that if he acted embarrassed, Imakura would understand what was happening, so he lifted his head from between Imakura's leg with a serious expression.

"It didn't work. When we get back, you should go to a hospital and get it fixed."

Imakura was still crying as he answered "Okay". His naked lower half heaved and relaxed in the candlelight as he breathed. Even his fat belly and uncircumcised, small penis were mysteriously appealing in the low light. As he gazed at Imakura's plump bottom

half, Yuichi was reminded of the paintings of naked women he had seen in high school textbooks. At the time, he had wondered how anyone could like such fat women, but now he had felt for himself just how good such round, soft skin could be.

Unfortunately, the artistic beauty that was Imakura's lower half was quickly covered by a pair of ugly underpants.

"I'm going to sleep." Imakura's voice betrayed his disappointment as he crawled back into the futon. Despite the pain, they had not been able to pull back the skin. Yuichi blew out the candle and got in his own futon, but kept replaying in his head the image of Imakura's lower half and how he shook while climaxing despite the pain. The images kept him from getting to sleep.

"He's fat, small, uncircumcised...and has the worst personality in the world."

Yuichi tried to banish the image with these words, but it didn't work. He sighed, and gazed at Imakura, who had already fallen asleep in the dark. Yuichi wanted so badly to kiss the lips through which Imakura was lightly breathing. There was no way around it now; he had fallen hard.

After the night they tried to pull back the skin, Imakura became distant. The day after, Yuichi assumed he was in a bad mood because of the events, but it continued over the next few days, which made him think there was another reason Imakura was avoiding him. He must be have figured out that Yuichi was gay but was keeping it to himself. He acted like a monkey performing

fellatio and even swallowing his semen. Imakura must have realized that this was not normal. It was unseemly to chase after someone who was purposely avoiding you so Yuichi didn't talk to Imakura unless it was necessary. Even though he was cool on the outside, inside he was shocked that his companion was avoiding him, and he regretted ever suggesting they try to pull back his skin a million times.

The problem started when he became attracted to a straight man. The beginning of a relationship with someone of the same persuasion can be hard, but it is especially difficult when the other person is straight. If he had just left well enough alone, he would have led a "normal" life, but if he'd tempted Imakura to a gay lifestyle to sate his own ego, he would bear some responsibility.

While Imakura was avoiding him, Yuichi seriously contemplated the basic problems of relationships between men. On the fifth day since a monkey wrench had been thrown into the gears, it began to rain.

Yuichi had decided that he would do nothing on rainy days. He didn't want to catch a cold by exerting himself outside in the damp chill. Usually he was happy when it rained but today he cursed the moisture. The two of them were stuck in this small house. As they sipped leftover rabbit soup from yesterday they sat on the porch and watched the rain. There was nothing else to do. As noon passed Imakura reluctantly broke the silence.

"Wanna play cards?"

Yuichi turned quickly and nodded. He was

happy to that Imakura had spoken. It was a sign that he was not angry with Yuichi. As they played, Imakura opened up.

"There is something I would like to say to you." Imakura gathered up the cards without looking at Yuichi as he spoke. "You must not breathe a word of what happened to anyone at our company."

Yuichi couldn't see his expression, but Imakura's ears were beet red.

"What happened?"

Even though he knew, he still asked.

"That...that I am really phimotic and even though we tried to fix it, we failed." Imakura chose each word with care. "I don't want people to laugh at my deformity. They already joke about my size...if they knew that I was phimotic as well..."

"I won't tell anyone."

Imakura kept his head down but glared straight at Yuichi.

"I always keep my promises."

Imakura must have been convinced because he seemed to relax and looked down.

"You'll never understand how I feel. You're good at work, you're cool, and everyone wishes they were you. How could you understand me..."

"But I..."

Imakura shook his head.

"You don't have to try to console me. I know myself the best. I'm fat, short, no good at sports, and ugly. I have been fat for as long as I can remember, and no matter how many times I diet, I can't lose weight. I

like sweets, so I get all stressed out when I diet and end up losing hair. You can't get much worse than being small, fat, and bald."

"And phimotic..." The expression on Imakura's face made it seem like it was the end of the world. He struggled to say those words and looked like he was about to cry. "I hate it. I have nothing but bad qualities. Why do I have to be with someone like you who has nothing but good ones? When I look at you I start to hate myself. God is so unfair."

Yuichi had no idea this is what Imakura had been thinking. As he saw his companion berating himself he couldn't help but feel sorry for him. He had to think of someone to lift his spirits.

"When we were trying to pull back your skin I saw you naked. You looked very beautiful."

If looks could kill...

"How could this tub of lard be beautiful? Are you mocking me?" It sounded as if Imakura was about to bite his head off.

"When I saw you naked I thought that it was not a bad thing that you are fat. Your skin is very beautiful. It's how you were born. Being plump can give a sense of security. You could use that to your advantage at work."

Imakura blinked in surprise.

"You...you think so?"

Yuichi meant what he said, but was still amused by how Imakura would just gobble up anything he fed the man.

"You need to have more confidence in

yourself. Don't get down on yourself. Act like you're daring everyone else to be as big as you."

Imakura's dark expression brightened like flowers blossoming in the spring.

"That's the first time anyone has said anything like that to me. No one but mama has ever said that it is okay to be fat."

Yuichi made sure to drive the point home.

"Okay then. When we get back, you have to make sure you don't gain back the weight you've lost. You can be fat, but not so much that it harms your health."

Imakura laughed.

"I've been at Suginoki for eight years but I've never felt like anyone's ever noticed me. Even when I was praised I felt like people were laughing at how fat I was behind my back. You've really turned me around."

Imakura stared at Yuichi. His gaze was filled with a trust that made Yuichi feel uneasy.

"I've never had this kind of conversation with mama. And, as embarrassing as it is to admit, I don't have anyone that I can have heart to heart talks with. I've never been good at making friends." Imakura sighed.

"I have to wonder why it's so easy to talk to you. I'm your boss but I seem to forget that when we're together. You're much more mature and than me, and smarter. The only thing I have over you is my age."

Yuichi unconsciously leaned in and held both hands firmly.

"That isn't true. You have your good points as well. I think you are very forthright and honest. You

don't put on airs. That is a very good trait for a person to have."

Imakura blushed. Yuichi was perplexed at how much energy he was putting into this.

"Thank you very much for saying so. Can I also ask you a question?"

Yuichi braced for what that question might be.

"If you don't mind, would you be my friend?"

It's not like they were kids and usually Yuichi would have laughed at such a straightforward question, but he found himself happy at being asked. Not only was it a sign that Imakura did not dislike him, it meant that he saw Yuichi in a good light.

"Sure, if you don't mind me as a friend."

Imakura's thin eyes got even thinner and he grinned widely, which made him dimple. This was the first time Yuichi had noticed it. When he looked down, he saw Imakura's right hand extended.

"Here's to our friendship."

Yuichi felt a little embarrassed and duplicitous, but he was careful not to show it as he took the round hand. The fingers were warm and soft. Imakura shyly laughed.

"You are my first male friend. I have acquaintances but they are all distant. When I was in grade school I was always jealous of others who had nicknames." Imakura fidgeted slightly and blushed even redder.

"If you don't mind, can I call you Yu-chan?"

Both his lips and his eyes betrayed his bashfulness. Yuichi's whole body blushed. It was so

cute. Imakura was cuter than anything he'd ever seen. He wanted to push him over and lick his whole body, penetrate him, and then make him come while moaning 'Yu-chan'.

"Uh... Yu-chan..."

Hearing this name brought Yuichi out of the fantasy.

"I'm sorry, but you're hurting my hand."

Only then did he notice that he had been holding Imakura's hand so tight that it was turning red.

The rain wouldn't stop. The number of marks on the pillar had reached twenty. That meant that it was already mid-June. The rainy season had started. Ever since the two had decided to become 'friends' Yuichi had been faced with a peculiar dilemma: Imakura had changed so much that it was hard to believe he had been that spoiled, defiant man when they got here. Imakura listened to Yuichi. Yuichi was glad that he was trusted by him so much, but it also made things harder. The more he was trusted, the harder it was to get physical.

Yuichi took stock of his own feelings. He liked Imakura, even if he was fat, small, and uncircumcised. He was cute when he smiled. Yuichi wanted to kiss him, to have sex with him. This was more than the friendship that Imakura desired; this was 'love'. In the past, he had dated men introduced to him by Tomoharu, the owner of the gay bar he frequented. Some of them were more handsome than Imakura, much thinner, and interesting, and yet he never wanted any of them more than he wanted Imakura, nor did he ever feel as



though he "liked" them. If Tomoharu were here right now, he would no doubt burst out laughing. He'd say something like, "Everyone has poor taste in something, but this is going a little too far." Still, Yuichi didn't care about personal tastes at the moment. He had feelings for Imakura so there was nothing he could do about it. He tried to analyze how he had come to feel this way for someone who was so completely different from his taste in men. He concluded that he felt the need to be the protector. Imakura had become dependent on him, and he had taken it upon himself to protect him.

"It just won't stop raining," Imakura blurted.

They were sitting on the porch and looking out into the haze. They had just finished lunch and didn't feel like playing cards. That is why they sat lazily watching the rain.

"It's the rainy season."

Imakura toyed with the nail on his thumb. It had grown quite long and they didn't have a nail clipper for grooming. They had even searched the other houses, to no avail.

"It's pretty humid."

Having tired of messing with his thumbnail, Imakura rolled up the sleeves of his short-sleeved shirt and waved his collar. Yuichi became entranced by his white arms and wrinkled belly as they became visible. If he didn't know Imakura, he would have thought that the man was coming on to him. He became very thirsty, and his heartbeat increased. He wanted to pin him to the ground right now and...

"Do you think I've lost weight?" Imakura

turned to Yuichi. "My clothes aren't as tight anymore."

It was no mystery why he should think so. He had lost quite a lot of weight since they arrived on the island. His fat had begun to burn away thanks to modest meals and an appropriate amount of exercise.

"You've gotten a lot thinner. It's too bad we don't have a mirror so you can see."

Yuichi touched Imakura's chin, now triple instead of quadruple, careful not to make it seem weird. "Your chin and face have thinned as well," he said.

"Wonderful." Imakura sounded almost bubbly as he touched his own face.

"Even though you've lost so much weight, you'll gain it all back in no time if you start gorging again when we get back."

"You certainly are stern, Yu-chan."

If this was earlier, Imakura would have been hysterical like a woman at the slightest offense, but now he was able to let Yuichi's sarcasm slide.

"I no longer feel like I'll die if I don't have sweets. Of course, I've kinda given up on them."

Sitting with his knees up, Imakura played with his growing bangs. "There is one thing that I am going to do when I get back."

"What's that?" Yuichi was intrigued.

"I'm going to buy a bottle of Romani Conti and drink it."

Yuichi didn't know a thing about wine, but he still knew this was one of the most expensive brands. He was sure that it was famous more for its price than its taste.

"One of mama's friends gave me some once. It felt like velvet on my tongue and had a unique bitterness...I'm not quite sure how to describe it. When we get back, I want to try it again. It will be my reward for doing so well here."

Imakura looked off into the distance as if he was trying to remember how the wine tasted, but then he looked to Yuichi. "Have you ever had Romani Conti?"

"Nope."

"Then I'll invite you over when I have it."

The man who had once stubbornly refused to share a chocolate bar was now offering to split a bottle of expensive wine. Yuichi marveled at just how much people can change in so short a time.

"What is the thing you want to do the most when we get back, Yu-chan?"

He couldn't believe a man in his thirties was asking such a childish question--and being so serious about it. What did he want to do the most? Drink, watch TV, sleep in a soft bed...but none of those seemed so important. More than when they got back, there was something he wanted to do now. Something he really wanted to do now.

"Sex, I think."

Imakura had been anticipating the answer, but he blushed when he heard it.

"...You certainly are frank."

"It's like I'm living a celibate life on the island. And my right hand just isn't doing it for me anymore. How about you?"

He made his question as direct as possible.

Imakura rubbed his hands together shyly.

"I...don't have a very strong libido. It's not that I don't feel it at all, and I like women, but eating has always been more fun..."

"But don't your feelings get all pent up if you don't do it every once in a while? What do you do then?"

"Well...you know...with my hand..." Imakura became more ambiguous. With his personality, and weight, and the fact that he was small and uncircumcised...could he really be...?

"Imakura, have you ever had sex?" Yuichi asked him pointedly. Looking down, Imakura's voice was high when he said "Yes, of course."

"Where did you do it the first time? In a hotel, or at her house?"

"At...at a hotel, I think." He was agitated and his gaze shifted from side to side.

"I bet you were nervous the first time, not knowing what to do."

"Yeah...but somehow it worked..." The telltale signs of vague answers and visible nervousness were there. Yuichi was certain now.

"Tell me the truth. You're a virgin, aren't you?" Yuichi brought it right out in the open. Imakura's face turned bright red so Yuichi knew he'd struck home. "You're embarrassed to be a virgin in your thirties, so you're lying, aren't you?"

Imakura's lips also became red from his biting them.

"Don't call me a virgin," he said quietly.

"Instead of acting like you've done it, you should just come right out and say 'I've never been with a woman'".

Yuichi sighed with frustration. Imakura glared at him from behind his tears.

"I didn't want you to laugh at me. Of course I am...what woman would want to go out with an ugly man like me?"

Yuichi drew closer to Imakura and lowered his voice. "Hasn't there been anybody who showed interest?"

His boss shook his head.

"But there was someone you liked?"

Imakura nodded, but only after a pause.

"Did you tell her that you liked her?"

Imakura yelled his response. "Why do I have to tell you?"

The large man obviously did not have good memories of this person. He sat silently without raising his head. Yuichi pondered what to do, and though he worried that it might seem unnatural, he touched Imakura's white cheek with his finger. As he gently rubbed it, Imakura began to cry yet again. Yuichi wiped his tears from his eyes with his thumb.

"She said she didn't like me because I was fat," he blurted. "I...made her sick..." His shoulders began to shudder. Yuichi held on to them.

"It's no good. I have no self confidence."

"But you're cute." Yuichi truly meant it. The way he got angry when Yuichi found out he was a virgin, the way he cried when he said he did not believe

in himself--it was all darling.

"The only people who call me cute are you and mama." Imakura wiped his wet eyes with his palms.

"Is it yourself you don't have confidence in, or sex?" Yuichi spoke with fondness.

"Both..."

"I can't help you have confidence in yourself, but I can teach you how to have sex."

Their eyes met straight on.

"If you practice beforehand, you can have confidence when you actually have sex and it will go better." Yuichi continued, even though he felt as if he were being a little too obvious. 'What practice,' he asked himself. 'You're just saying that because you want to touch him.'

"We don't have anything else to do today. Don't worry, I won't ask you to pay for the lesson."

Imakura laughed at his joke.

"Okay. Maybe you can show me how to get things started."

The fish was caught in the net. Yuichi cautiously drew him in.

"Have you ever kissed anyone?"

"...No."

"Let's start with kissing, then."

Imakura was a little reluctant.

"We're actually going to kiss? I thought you were just going to tell me how to do it."

"That would work if just words sufficed. Practice is better than theory. You will learn faster if you do it yourself."

As Yuichi approached, Imakura stepped back slightly.

"Do I really have to kiss you?"

"Yes. There is no deep meaning to it. In foreign countries, they even kiss to greet each other. Or do you want to give up on practicing?"

It was like they were bargaining. When he made it seem as if it was no big deal, Imakura moved closer.

"Just a little..."

"Close your eyes."

Imakura did as he was told. His lips were ready to receive. When Yuichi realized that this would be the first time someone other than his 'mama' kissed Imakura's lips like this, his heart started to race. They were soft, moist, and resilient. He kissed the top lips first, then the bottom. After soft kisses that resembled the chirping of birds, their lips separated and Imakura opened his eyes.

"This is a little embarrassing." His face was red, and he wiped his lips.

"This time, you try."

Imakura let out a yelp.

"If I do everything, you won't get any practice. Try to remember what I did, and then do it yourself."

"Okay..."

Imakura put his hands on Yuichi's shoulders. He was slower than a turtle to approach and the kisses were clumsy.

"This is too strange," he said. Imakura kept his head down after the kiss.

"Lips are very sensitive, so it is understandable for you to feel that way. This may have been your first time, but I can see there is a great kisser inside of you." When Yuichi stopped to think about it, he was able to praise Imakura honestly. The man looked pleased and laughed.

"Now let's do something a little harder."

Suddenly, Imakura's expression showed a sense of worry.

"This time we'll use our tongues when we kiss."

Imakura pulled back in resistance.

Yuichi moved to reassure him. "All you have to do is bend your neck and open your mouth a little. First I'll do it. Be sure not to bite my tongue."

Imakura closed his eyes tight and that was a good thing. Yuichi was sure his face might resemble a starving beast, an attacking lion. Holding him, he felt the soft folds of skin with his fingers. They locked lips, and he slid his tongue into Imakura's accepting mouth.

"Nnn..." Imakura moaned slightly. Yuichi ran his tongue along Imakura's well-lined teeth. When it reached past the back teeth, the body he was holding stiffened. He concentrated his movement there. He could hear muffled words, and for a moment, Yuichi forgot that, at least on the face of it, he was only teaching. He licked Imakura's mouth with abandon. Someone had told him before that he kissed too rough. He liked the hot wetness of the tongues and the feeling of touching organs.

"Too...much..."

They separated. Imakura gasped for air and

then a number of deep breaths. He wiped his moist, beautiful lips with his hand.

"I couldn't breathe," he said with a red face.

"Did you breathe through your nose?"

"Really? You can do that?"

"If you don't, you'll suffocate."

"That was the first time anyone ever told me."

Having just kissed, they were still facing and holding each other. The only sound was that of the rain. It was quiet, and neither spoke. When Imakura finally caught his breath, Yuichi whispered to try it for himself.

"I can't do it that way."

"Just take it slowly. We have all the time in the world, and because it's me, you don't have to worry about making a mistake."

Imakura approached. Yuichi found himself imagining how the kiss would be, and he knew no matter how clumsy it might be it would excite him. He swallowed the spit.

Though he was nervous in the beginning, once the first step was taken, Imakura's hesitation melted away. He must have realized that this was not normal, but he did what Yuichi said, even if he did complain that it was embarrassing. The sound of rain continued to echo throughout the house, sometimes harder, sometimes softer. Though the door was open, they took off their clothes in a dark corner of the room. Yuichi gazed at the pale, naked body before him. Imakura had definitely lost weight, but he still had a triple chin and his belly was huge. He had hardly any body hair, and he only had the

faintest amount of soft, brown pubic hair under which hung his thumb-sized penis. Just like Yuichi, Imakura seemed to be mesmerized by his companion's crotch.

"I've never really looked at another man...are you normal? Or are you bigger than others?"

"I think I'm average."

Hearing this, Imakura sadly looked down at his own penis. He noticed that Yuichi had been looking at it, and covered it with his hands in shame.

"Size really isn't that important. It just has to get in and then it's all up to technique."

"Oh..."

Yuichi steadied himself and approached Imakura. When he touched his shoulder, Imakura looked up.

"What are you going to do?"

"We're going to practice caressing. Why do you think we took off our clothes?"

"I...uh..."

"Did you want to see me naked?" Though Yuichi said it as a joke, Imakura nodded seriously that, yes, that was the case.

"I have always wondered what others look like. I know that I'm small, but I've never had the chance to compare it to others."

"Haven't you ever peeked in the bathroom?"

Imakura looked down.

"I always use the stall. Ever since someone called me "mini-wiener" in high school, I've been afraid of being mocked by others."

Yuichi remembered that someone at work had

commented that Imakura always used a stall even when peeing.

"So, what do you think?"

"It really is big." The frank answer was both strange and cute.

Yuichi took his fingers from Imakura's shoulder and rubbed his cheek.

"Caressing is not very hard. Each person has their own pleasure spots, and once you find them, you concentrate on those areas."

He ran his finger slowly down Imakura's chin and neck, and when he came to the center of his pink nipples, he pinched them. Imakura yelped and stepped back. His face was beet red.

"Too much? Shall I do it from behind?"

"Do what from behind?"

"Caress you. That way you won't have to see my face. There is one thing I should tell you. I might get erect, so if you feel something stiff on your back, don't pay it any attention."

"Uh...ok..."

Yuichi went behind Imakura and hugged him. He wanted to leave his mark, and placing his lips on his white neck, began to suck hard. His fingers moved up the wrinkled belly and rubbed both nipples. They became hard with the stimulation, and Yuichi pinched them with his fingernails.

"Ow."

He released his grip and began rubbing them again, and continued to do so while changing the pressure and speed of his movement. He bit Imakura's

soft, succulent ear lobes.

“Ah...”

When Yuichi placed his tongue in Imakura's ear, his large legs shook uncontrollably.

“You like it there, don't you? See?”

“My legs...I can hardly stand...”

“That means it's good.”

Imakura stumbled as he sat down. Yuichi stayed behind him, still holding him, and pulled him between his legs. While caressing his nipple with his left hand, he stretched his right hand down towards Imakura's crotch. Passing his wrinkled belly, Yuichi felt his soft pubic hair. Below that was the thumb-sized penis. It was cute how it fit into his hand. Playing with it a little, it became stiff. Even so, the tip did not reach past the foreskin. Yuichi held down the tip with his index finger. Pushing down, he was able to get his finger into the skin. He then began to rub the head, something that even Imakura had probably never done before.

“Ooh...ahhh...”

It must have felt good because Imakura did not resist. As he continued, his index finger became moist. He took the finger and began to gently rub around Imakura's anus.

“Women have vaginas. You can touch there, too.”

He acted like he knew what he was talking about, but Yuichi had never touched a woman anywhere near there. It was the most he could do to kiss one of the women he had tried to date. Moistening his finger, he pushed against Imakura's modesty.

"Can I use this in its place?"

Imakura sounded desperate when he replied.

"In place of what?"

"I'm going to move my finger around like it's a vagina."

"No. It's dirty."

Yuichi kissed the aggravated Imakura. He had wanted to kiss him of course, but he also hoped it would lessen his resistance. He searched for his mouth and kissed Imakura like they had in the beginning of their lesson. Having sated himself, their lips separated, but a string of saliva still linked them. Imakura's mouth shook as he breathed, and his eyes gazed at Yuichi.

"Some women like it when you play with their ass. Sometimes you can even have sex in it."

"But...wouldn't that hurt...?"

He was still resistant and would not yet give permission.

"All you have to do is relax. Think about it. Big things are always coming out of it. And when you have a physical, they put a camera in through there. A finger shouldn't be any trouble at all."

"But..."

Yuichi put his finger to Imakura's lips to silence him. Imakura's eyes went wide with surprise.

"Lick my finger."

Perhaps not comfortable with the situation, Imakura's tongue did not move. Yuichi moistened it himself and lightly touched his anus.

"No. Please don't."

The man was tense and Yuichi could not get

his finger inside.

“Relax.”

Yuichi pulled back his finger like he was giving up. Imakura’s expression relaxed. Yuichi pulled his chin up and kissed him hard.

“Nnn...ahh...”

Imakura tried to flee, but Yuichi pulled him back each time. While he had Imakura preoccupied with his lips, Yuichi brought his hand to his crotch to distract him and then stuck his other index finger in from behind.

“Ah...ahhhh...”

Once it was in, the rest was easy. He stuck it in as far as it would go and searched for the prostate. When he found it, he pressed hard. Imakura’s body shook with shock. As Yuichi continued, Imakura’s legs began to shake wildly, and his modest penis stiffened towards the sky.

“Doesn’t that feel good?”

“N...no...”

His pale hips shook, and the hole tightened. A white liquid spurt out from his foreskin. It was cute how his penis kept shaking even after he came. He was still climaxing. Yuichi couldn’t help but chuckle at its stamina.

“You really are cute.”

Imakura breathed hard with his eyes closed. While the orgasm continued, Yuichi acted as if he was rubbing his anus, but took advantage of the situation to insert another finger.

When Yuichi awoke, it was dark. He didn’t

know what time it was, but he was hungry. They had been holding each other in their sleep, and the warmth felt good, good enough to put up with an empty stomach for now. He hugged Imakura's soft belly tight. This must have woken him because Imakura attempted to get up. Yuichi hung on to his ample hips to keep him from rising.

"I want to get up," Imakura mumbled.

"And do what?"

"I'm hungry...and my waist is sticky."

Yuichi pulled Imakura closely and gave him a deep kiss.

"You'd have to start a fire and cook the food. Why bother? Let's just stay here and sleep until morning."

"But..."

"I'll clean you off."

Yuichi reached around in the dark for the candle and lit it. Using the light, he went around to the well and dampened a hand towel. When he returned, Imakura was sitting on top of the futon.

Yuichi wiped Imakura's body with the hand towel. He made sure to get everywhere: his thighs, the area where he had been pressing his penis, his crotch, and his bottom.

"Thank you," he muttered when Yuichi was done.

"Is that better?"

"Yeah."

Yuichi pulled Imakura into his chest and patted his back. Imakura also brought his hands around

to Yuichi's back and held it tight.

"Let's sleep together until morning."

Imakura's only answer was a nod.

The next morning, the rain had stopped. Yuichi awoke naked to bright sunlight and an empty stomach. Imakura lay next him, his skin exposed. Unlike the intimate dark brought about by the rain, the house was now bright. As he breathed the sweet morning air, he left a number of kiss marks on Imakura's back.

There were no straight lines on his back due to the fat. When Yuichi lightly squeezed his round, soft buttocks, Imakura awakened. He twisted his body and looked at Yuichi with sleepy eyes. At first Yuichi thought they were gazing at each other, but Imakura's eyes were pointed down towards the futon. His ears were bright red. Yuichi laid down on top of him.

"What's wrong?"

Imakura didn't answer. When Yuichi held him and rocked back and forth, Imakura finally said in a low voice, "I'm embarrassed."

"So am I."

"But...what we did...:

Yuichi raised Imakura so he was sitting up. He held him from behind just like he had when he started caressing him and rubbed his soft cheek with his index finger.

"Didn't you like it?"

"If mama ever found out, I..."

"Imakura." When Yuichi raised his voice the body he was holding began to shake. "I asked how you

felt about it. Did you not like kissing me?"

"I..."

"Be honest."

Imakura bit his lip and then looked up at Yuichi.

"It wasn't bad..."

Even though he seemed confused at first, his reaction was good. He was certain that Imakura had enjoyed himself, but he was relieved to actually hear him say it.

"And how do you feel when you are touched like this?"

He pinched both of his nipples. Imakura yelped in a coarse voice.

"Does that give you a thrill?"

"...Yes..." Imakura's whole body turned red. Yuichi rubbed his crotch and then moved past his balls to his ass.

"How about when I put my finger in here?"

"I don't like that..."

"Really? Even though you came over and over when I did it last night?"

Tears welled up in Imakura's eyes. Yuichi kissed the ones that came out.

"It's nothing to cry about. There is nothing to be ashamed of if it felt good."

Imakura sobbed as if he did not want to hear the words, but as Yuichi rubbed his head and kissed him, he fell silent. Wanting to see his face, he made Imakura turn and sit across from him on his knees. As he pulled him close, it was cute how Imakura's small penis rubbed

against his navel.

"Do you promise you won't laugh? Or think that I'm weird?"

He clung to Yuichi and asked over and over. When convinced, he brought his mouth close to Yuichi's ear and whispered a startling confession: "It felt awesome." He then sat back again.

"Are you sure I'm not weird to be so turned on by doing this with a man like you?"

"It's just fine. You were just practicing sex. I was caressing your body to make it feel good, so there is nothing wrong with you feeling that way. That's normal."

"Really? Good."

Imakura breathed a sigh of relief and clung tight to Yuichi.

"Excuse me for saying so...but I really like sex."

Yuichi climbed to the highest point on the island for the first time in days. Whichever direction he looked, there was nothing but ocean, ocean, ocean--a horizon with nothing on it. But, there was no longer the feeling of longing to be rescued. As he turned towards the house, he looked at the plants growing near the path. Now that things had settled down, he once again searched for the weight loss herb he had originally come to find, but was unsuccessful. He did, however, find a new field of vegetables. It looked as if it had once been an eggplant and tomato garden, and he saw the red of tomatoes peeking out from among the weeds. He picked

two and put them in his bag. There was an old house near the field with a beehive underneath its roof. A swarm of bees buzzed in the air surrounding it. He jumped back to avoid getting stung, but then he realized there must be honey inside the hive. That could be an important food source, and he knew Imakura liked sweet things. He wanted to get it for him.

Yuichi walked around the field collecting branches. He didn't find enough, so he looked inside the house also. As he was pulling up floorboards, he found a nail cutter. It was a little rusty, but still usable. Taking the wood he had gathered, he lit a fire underneath the hive. As the fire grew, the smoke and heat drifted up and scattered the bees. When they were gone, Yuichi took the hive. It had gotten dark during this project, and when he returned home, Imakura was feeding their rabbit in the back yard. Hearing Yuichi's footsteps, he turned and welcomed him home.

"You're late. Dinner's ready."

"Let's eat."

He took the tomatoes out of his bag and gave them to Imakura.

"I found a tomato patch. There were eggplants, too, but they were not quite ready to pick."

"These look good."

Imakura carried them carefully and placed them in the kitchen. When he washed his hands and came out, dinner was done. Tonight they were having rabbit and potato soup.

"I walked to the dock this afternoon."

Imakura talked while eating a hot piece of

potato. Everything used to be a bother, but he was much more active recently. You could tell just by looking that he had lost a lot of weight and this made him feel better as well. He was down to a double chin, and his belly did not stick out as much.

"But I didn't see any boats."

"I went to the top of the hill, but I didn't see anything either."

After that the conversation stopped, but it was not an uncomfortable silence as they ate. It was like they were an old married couple. As long as it didn't rain, Yuichi would leave in the morning to find food. While he was gone, Imakura would prepare food, or clean, or start the bath. At night, Yuichi would return and eat the food that Imakura had made. And then, later... Their routine had become just like that of a married couple. When they finished eating, Imakura took the dishes to the kitchen. Though the abandoned house had been empty when they got here, they had been able to give it a lived-in feeling. As Imakura washed the dishes Yuichi sharpened the nail clippers on the grinding stone. He used a nail to reach the places he couldn't with the stone.

"What are you doing? The bath is ready."

Having removed the rust from the clippers he got into the bath before the water cooled. Perhaps Imakura had already been in because the room was filled with steam and the floor tiles were wet.

When he was done, he went back to the room still naked and drying his hair with a hand towel. Imakura was on the porch. He was looking down in the moonlight and making a rustling noise.

"What's up?"

"I was trying to sew the hole in my shirt, but it's too hard to see."

"Why don't you use a candle?"

"We don't have many left. I didn't want to waste them. I should do it during the day."

Imakura put the shirt down. Yuichi sat down next to him and took his right hand.

"Shall I cut your nails?"

"You have clippers?"

"I found them today."

He cut each long nail carefully. The sound of the clippers echoed through the quiet night air.

"Shall I do your toes, too?"

"...Please"

He accidentally cut one too deep, and Imakura winced.

"Sorry."

"It's okay. It didn't hurt that much."

Blood started to come out of the cut. Yuichi instinctively put the toe in his mouth. As he sucked on it, it stopped bleeding. But he didn't stop there and began to lick between Imakura's toes.

"Yu... Yu-chan" Imakura shook.

Caressing his feet seemed to turn him on. Yuichi lifted himself, hugged Imakura and started to kiss him. He lifted his tank top as they kissed, and gently pinched his nipple. This was all it took to make Imakura moan sexily. He played with his nipple with his right hand while he moved around his lower body with his left. Just working his feet and nipple had already made

Imakura erect. Yuichi pulled down his underwear, and vigorously massaged his balls. Though they were out in the open on the porch, neither cared. It was not as if there was anyone but themselves on the island. Knowing this, Imakura spread his legs wide in the moonlight with no hesitation. After paying ample attention to Imakura's crotch with both his hand and mouth, Yuichi whispered in his ear.

"Can I come in?"

Last week, Yuichi entered Imakura for the first time. He was tight, and it felt like heaven to Yuichi, but it was hard to penetrate no matter how much he lubricated himself. Though he was able to come while inside, Imakura complained the whole time about how much it hurt. They had had anal sex twice more since then, but Imakura was still not used to it.

"No."

"I'll be gentle."

"It doesn't matter. You're too big and it hurts."

He would not change his mind. Yuichi kissed him over and over to weaken his will.

"It will only hurt at first. Once I get deep inside, it'll be fine. It feels good when I thrust, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but..."

"I'll do it so it doesn't hurt." Yuichi massaged him with his fingers at first so it wouldn't hurt as much.

"Aahh...oohh..."

It sounded like it hurt just a little at first, but then he let out moans of pleasure. Yuichi moved his hips as he drank in the moans with his kisses.



"Nnn...nnn..."

They changed positions without separating and Yuichi came twice. Imakura lay down hard as if their activities had tired him and Yuichi held him tenderly. As they kissed, Yuichi found his weary expression sexy, and became aroused again. When Imakura noticed, he pulled back, but Yuichi held him down from behind and penetrated again. Since they had already had sex once, there was no resistance this time as he entered him. Their lovemaking continued in the moonlight. After they were done, Yuichi continued to caress Imakura. While having sex he became strangely aware of how alone they were. Whether they were talking, fighting, or loving, it was only the two of them. Even though he'd never thought of himself as an introvert, he found himself adapting well to this secluded world.

"I wonder when someone will come," Imakura said as he laid his head on Yuichi's chest.

"Do you want to go home?"

"Of course. You do, too, don't you?"

He did, but...there was a part of him that was very happy with the way things were right now. There may be inconveniences, but he was with the man he now loved, and they were able to have sex out in the open without having to worry about the eyes of others. It was like a dream. Still, there was one problem. He only had two more of the "Like A Virgin" condoms that he'd brought with him. He'd originally planned to give them to a friend. He'd never imagined that he'd use them with Imakura. Though technically he didn't need them for sex, there was no doctor or medicine available on

the island if he hurt Imakura. Not being able to go to the hospital was the one thing that made life on the deserted island less than perfect.

"You're making a face. What are you thinking about?"

Imakura touched Yuichi's face. He couldn't come right out and say that he was thinking he would have to wash the condoms so he could reuse them.

"I was just thinking about how cute you look when you come."

Imakura blushed. When he did that, Yuichi hugged him and nibbled on his soft shoulders. Then he remembered the beehive. Still naked, he left his partner's warm body and went inside. He took the hive out of his cloth bag and split it in two in the pot.

"I forgot that I brought something home for you."

When Imakura tilted his head in curiosity, Yuichi spread some honey around his mouth.

"It smells sweet." He licked his lips and opened his eyes in surprise. "It's honey!"

"I found a beehive. I thought it would be a good source of extra food in an emergency."

"Yu-chan. I want more," Imakura purred.

"Not now. I said it's for emergencies."

"Then I want what's left on your hand."

Yuichi rubbed the remaining honey off on his crotch.

"If you want it, lick it off."

Imakura did not seem pleased by the order, but when Yuichi brought the hand with the honey under his

nose, Imakura licked the finger clean.

"There's more down below."

Imakura stared at the drops of honey on Yuichi's crotch. Though he didn't like giving head, he wanted the honey badly, and brought his lips to Yuichi's penis. He sounded like cat as he licked the honey off. Stimulated by the hot moistness of his tongue, Yuichi got rock hard.

"Yu-chan, it's harder to lick when you get so big."

But despite the complaint, Imakura didn't stop. He was concentrating so hard on the honey, he didn't notice when Yuichi was ready to come. The semen sprayed his face, and he looked like he was going to cry.

"I can't believe you did that!"

"I'm so sorry. Forgive me?"

Yuichi wiped Imakura's face as he apologized. As he did so, he also licked his nose, cheeks, and eyes like a dog. It must have worked, because Imakura broke out in laughter.

"That's enough. Really."

He couldn't be happier than to hear the laughter. They hugged and kissed, and teased each other until Imakura fell asleep. Yuichi could see the moon through the open window. Before he went to sleep, he caressed his fat, cute lover's back.

Shuji Higashiyama traveled with Yoshie Imakura to the "Prefectural Ornithological Institute" in Miyagi Prefecture. It was almost a month and half

since his brother and his boss had gone missing. Shuji's missing older brother was gay. He'd already come out to his family. On television when a member of a family was gay, there was a strained feeling in the household due their strange "sexual preference", but their family was different. His brother was the leader of their family, and when he announced that he was gay, the others had no choice but to accept it. Also, Yuichi was determined that the Higashiyama name would live on, so he had made it his mission to make sure his younger brother married and had children, which he did at a relatively young age.

Yuichi had been a good student and a good man, and Shuji was sure that he would never run off with someone without saying anything, but he had to face the facts. He'd seen a picture of the other man who was missing, and he was huge, almost grossly obese. He knew his brother had an eye for other men, and though he would never say it front of his brother, he thought he was the coolest person he knew. Yuichi hadn't told him the type of men he liked, but he couldn't believe that he was a chubby chaser. Every time he saw the photo of the other man, he couldn't help but think that his brother had problems he couldn't tell anyone about.

The trail of his brother and his boss had gone cold at Hamamatsu Station. Shuji didn't give up on asking questions though, and he found out that the two other men who had accompanied them to the island had returned to Miyagi Prefecture that night by bus. Shuji and Yoshie took a bus to Miyagi, and when they arrived, they split up to gather more information. Shortly after



noon, Shuji picked up a clue from a taxi driver who just happened to be eating at the same noodle stand.

"A little while back, I had a pair of customers who said they had just gotten back from a deserted island."

Shuji saw a ray of hope.

"It was early in the morning, like they had just gotten off of an overnight bus. I remember it because the deserted island made me curious. I remember now... they said they studied birds."

Shuji showed him a photo of the two, but the man seemed confused.

"No. They were older. And they had beards, and certainly weren't as fat as this man."

If his brother were serious about running away, it would make sense for him to disguise himself.

"Can you tell me where you took them?"

Seeing how desperate he was, the driver reluctantly agreed to tell him. Shuji picked up Yoshie and took her to the place the driver had shown him.

The two stood in front of an old building with a sign that read: "Prefectural Ornithological Institute." Shuji asked the driver several times if he was sure this was the place and each time he answered that he was certain. Though he had been sure the driver was talking about the two men they were searching for, now that he had arrived, he began to have his doubts. Still, this was his last hope. He knocked on the door of the institute. An older, bearded man answered the door. He fit the taxi driver's description to a "T".

"Can I help you?"

Shuji took out the photos.

"I'm looking for these men. Have you seen them?"

The man squinted and nodded yes.

"I do seem to remember them, but where was it? I especially remember the fat one..."

A man looked on curiously from behind. Seeing the photos he asked: "Isn't that the guy on the boat we took to Fuchi Island?"

The bearded man clapped his hands in remembrance. "That's it. The two from the pharmaceutical company."

"Yes."

Yoshie pushed Shuji out of the way.

"The one in this photo is my son. He's been missing for a month and a half ever since he went on a business trip with his employee. I only know they went to a deserted island..."

The bearded man turned pale.

"Excuse me?"

"We've asked so many people, and we found someone that said he had brought two people who had just been to a deserted island to this place."

Yoshie was just about to cry. "My only son is a weak man...I'm so worried..."

The bearded man looked at his companion and fidgeted.

"We met them on a boat on the way to Fuchi Island. They said they were going to look for herbs that had something to do with weight loss. They said they were only going for the day, but they weren't on the

same boat we took back from the island."

Shuji played back the conversation he had with the fisherman guild clerk in his head.

"I've heard that my brother called once to say that the boat had not arrived. But then they boarded soon after..."

The bearded man brought his hand to his chin.

"They weren't on the boat. Or, at least they weren't on the boat we took back. I just thought it meant they were going to stay on the island overnight."

Shuji's eyes met those of the bearded man.

"You should go to the island right away to make sure. It really is a deserted island, and no boats will even go near it unless there's a specific reason. If they were left out there they could be in trouble. There are a number of abandoned homes, so they would have shelter at least, but there was no food or water as I recall. I would hate to think that they starved..."

Yoshie looked like she was about to have a convulsive fit.

"Ma'am. Please settle down. I'm sure they're OK."

When the ornithologist put his hand on her shoulder, she collapsed in the doorway.

On a beautiful day with not a cloud in the sky, Yuichi led Imakura up to the highest point of the island. Imakura was still not used to the exercise, and had to stop many times along the way. In the end, Yuichi had to pull him to the top.

"What a beautiful view."

Even though he had complained about aches and being tired the whole way up, his face brightened when he saw the scenery.

"I'm so glad I came."

"It's also cooler here because of the breeze."

The wind was strong at the top and their sleeves flapped in the wind. It also blew Imakura's long bangs. Yuichi sat down but Imakura was content to stand and look over the distant water. Thinking Imakura must be looking for a boat, Yuichi suddenly stood with a start.

"What is it?"

He took his lover's hand and they started down the hill. Imakura could see that his mood had soured and tried to get him to talk.

"Are you angry?"

Yuichi stopped at a woody spot on the path.

"Why do you think that?"

"I don't know. Did I make you angry?"

Yuichi pulled his hand and hugged him. He kissed him softly, and then deeper. Imakura became weak in the knees and Yuichi pushed him down in the tall grass by the side of the path. He pulled up his shirt and saw that his white skin was drenched with sweat.

"What...what are you doing?"

Ignoring his resistance Yuichi took the shirt all the way off. He pinched Imakura's pink, sweaty nipples, and they hardened and turned the color of ripe peaches. They looked so good he kissed them with his lips and put his hand down his pants. Imakura was already hard.

"I want you."

Imakura shivered when he whispered in his

ear. "Not here."

"The grass should keep your back from getting scratched."

Yuichi looked into Imakura's eyes.

"There's no one else here. It doesn't matter if we do it in the house or outside."

"But..."

Yuichi forced off his underwear, leaving him completely naked. His white skin glistened in the sun. Imakura lay in the grass as he was born, resembling some plump muse of mythology. The thought of taking something holy excited Yuichi and he spread the man's legs wide. In this position, the sun caressed his genitals. Imakura twisted his hips in resistance, but he gradually gave in to Yuichi's kisses. Imakura was tight, and when Yuichi penetrated, he could not help but moan.

"The sky...it's so blue."

Yuichi turned to look for himself. Just as his lover had said, there was not a white cloud to mar the blue sky.

"Do you know what they call this?"

"Huh?"

His face was sweaty and Imakura looked up over his cheek.

"Fun in the sun."

Yuichi took Imakura's hand and led it to his own crotch and made him touch where the two of them met.

"You're wide open and I'm in as far as I can go. Can you feel it?"

"No...no..."

"Don't say no. If you touch here you can understand what I'm doing. When we have sex like this outside it's called 'fun in the sun'.

Imakura started sobbing.

"Why are you crying? It doesn't hurt, does it? I'm moving gently so it won't hurt. It feels good, doesn't it?"

"Yes...but..."

Yuichi kissed him to calm him down and the crying finally stopped. After coming twice inside him, Yuichi laid still for a while just holding Imakura and then rose and picked up their clothes.

"Did you come inside me?"

"Yes."

"It feels gross. Like it's about to come out..."

"If you can't hold it in, let it out here. I'll wash you up when we get back."

"I'll try to hold it until we get back then."

He held Imakura up by the shoulders to help him along on the way back. The sunlight was harsh, and it made it even hotter to press up next to each other, but neither made the effort to separate. When they came to the path that followed the shore Imakura suddenly let out a cry.

"Boat! Yu-chan! There's a boat!"

"No way."

"I'm not lying. There's a boat at the dock."

Yuichi had thought he was joking, but it was true. There was a small boat at the dock. After a month and half, there was finally a boat.

"Yes!"

Imakura flung off Yuichi's hand and ran off. It was hard to believe he had seemed so helpless just a second ago. People were just starting to disembark from the boat. He could see a plump, older woman. Imakura dashed towards her.

"Mama! Mama!"

They hugged tightly and both started crying. Next off was Yuichi's brother Shuji, who breathed a sigh of relief when he saw his older brother.

"I'm so glad you're okay."

"There's no way I was going to let myself die here." He said it coolly. Compared to the emotional Imakura and his mother, the exchange between Yuichi and his brother was as cold as the North Pole.

"What's with the attitude? Do you know what I went through to find you?"

"You're late."

And the timing was bad. He should have gotten here much sooner, before Yuichi had even laid a finger on Imakura. Either that or much later.

They went back to their house to gather their things, but Yuichi and Imakura barely said a word. Imakura's mother huddled closely to her son and they didn't have a chance to talk.

"Takashi, you poor thing. Look how thin you are. I'll take you to the hospital as soon as we get back. Oh, I hope you didn't catch any weird diseases here..."

Even on the boat the two were inseparable. It was enough to make even Shuji uncomfortable.

"Does he have a mother complex?" he whispered to Yuichi.

The excitement of the reunion with his mother had taken its toll, and Imakura fell sound asleep on her knees. Even though Yuichi had been looking at him ever since they got on the boat Imakura didn't look back. He was angry that his lover would forget about him so quickly once his mother showed up. He tried to cheer himself up by thinking that at least his own family had been worried about him. When he realized that looking at Imakura was just making him angry he closed his eyes and pretended to sleep.

When they arrived at port, Imakura's mother hurried him into a taxi to take him to a hospital. Yuichi didn't even have a chance to say goodbye. After their car left Yuichi and his brother got in their own taxi and went to the station. They got there just in time to catch a bullet train to Tokyo.

Thinking his brother might be hungry, Shuji bought him a box lunch before they got on the train. As Yuichi enjoyed food he could only dream of on the island, he felt for the first time like the ordeal was over.

"I never dreamed that you'd been left behind on a deserted island. I thought you'd run away with that other guy," his brother chuckled. "I thought you'd become a chubby chaser."

Rising to go to the toilet, Yuichi suddenly stopped and kicked his brother's shin hard.

"Hey! What?"

Yuichi glared at him. Shuji held his shins and bit his lip in pain and confusion while his brother headed off to the restroom.

After peeing, Yuichi began to wonder if

Imakura was able to clean up by himself. He had come in him and promised to clean him, but he didn't get the chance. He hoped he didn't become ill. He wanted to see his face, to kiss him... Even though he had just seen his face and had been with him for so long, he was already lonely. Yuichi was angry at himself for feeling this way. They'd have the chance to see each other in a day or two. They worked at the same company, so they would have to see each other even if they didn't want to. This was his only consolation.

At the time, though, Yuichi had no way of knowing that their company had gone bankrupt during their absence.

Yuichi heard about his company's demise the night he got home. He'd talked to his parents from the port so they knew he was fine, but his mother still broke down in tears when she saw him. That night the dinner table was filled with his favorite foods. He made sure to keep conversation limited to fun things on the island so as not to worry them. They talked late into the night, and Shuji decided to stay the night as well.

After a bath and a shave, Yuichi was about to call his section chief when his brother asked him whom he was calling.

"My company. I need to find out if we've been fired while we were stuck on the island."

Shuji started to tell him, but then stopped. Yuichi knew there was something wrong when he saw the look of sympathy in his eyes.

"Have they said anything to you? Have I been fired?"

"Your company...went bankrupt."

Bankrupt...bankrupt... It took him some time before reality hit.

"No! You're lying."

Shuji almost felt like slapping his brother despite all the work he had put in to find him.

"There's nothing I can do about it. It happened just a day or so after you left on your trip. There was a huge headline in the paper. I didn't want to upset you, so I didn't say anything until now."

He couldn't resurrect the company by blaming his brother. Shuji said that there were still people there to take care of loose ends, so he decided to visit the next day. Yuichi stared quietly at the ceiling from his comfortable bed and realized that this was the first time he'd been on it in a month and a half. Bankruptcy, unemployment...nothing but negative words danced around in his head. It was like he'd been pulled back from a dream world into grim reality.

He wanted to hear Imakura's voice. He wanted to hear Imakura call him 'Yu-chan'. When he couldn't bear it any longer, he called his lover's cell phone, but didn't get through. He sulked and turned over. It felt strange to be able to stretch his arms and legs all the way out. They had been sleeping on the same futon. When he stretched out his hand, he would feel that familiar warmth, and if he playfully touched Imakura, his companion would complain that he couldn't sleep. But that didn't happen here. He tossed again, and the phone rang.

"Yu-chan" The voice spoke out of his cell



phone. He knew who it was. At last!

"Did you call?"

"Yes. Once."

"I'm sorry. My phone was in the hotel this whole time and I had to charge it, so I couldn't call you back right away. What are you doing?"

"Trying to sleep."

"I'm at the hotel. I'm calling you from the public phone. Everything checked out fine at the hospital. We're going to stay the night in Shizuoka and return to Tokyo tomorrow."

"Did you hear about the company?"

"Yeah. Mama told me."

"We'll have to find new jobs. But we can worry about that later. Get a good night's sleep tonight."

"Yeah..." Imakura's voice dropped.

"What's wrong?"

"I can't sleep. Mama told me to go to bed, but...it's hard to sleep alone after I've gotten used to sleeping with you."

Yuichi was thrilled that Imakura felt the same way he did. He wanted to be with him, to see his face. He wanted to rush to the hotel.

"Let's meet tomorrow. What time will you get back?"

"Around noon. I'll call you when we arrive."

"Got it. Until tomorrow, then."

"Uh...wait."

"What?"

"Can we talk a little more? I want to hear your voice."

Yuichi was happy to hear this, but also somewhat embarrassed, and it made it difficult to find something to say. Their silence continued.

"Yu-chan, say something."

"We can see each other tomorrow."

The phone beeped as Imakura's money ran out.

"Okay. I'll see you tomorrow. Good night."

"Yeah...good night."

Even though he'd been so gentle and loving on the phone that night, no call ever came from Imakura.

The next day, Yuichi visited his bankrupt company, but there were only a few employees left to take care of things. Everyone else had been fired. It was clear from the start that he wasn't going to solve anything, but at least he was able to gather his personal items. He asked about his salary, but was told that the company had withheld all of May's pay from the employees. Yuichi had been hoping that they would at least pay him for the days he had worked, but that seemed to be asking too much.

The second he walked out of the building, he joined the ranks of the unemployed. He had to work if he wanted to eat. He had to find a new job. Still, he imagined that it wouldn't be easy in the poor economy. He called his friend Maeda from Suginoki Pharmaceuticals. He reached him on his cell phone, and Maeda was surprised to hear from him. He'd found another job close by, and they made plans to meet at a café near the station for lunch.

"Everybody was wondering where you were. But when the company went belly up, we were too busy mopping up the mess to worry about anyone else. Once things calmed down, I just assumed you'd found another job and were doing well. I had no idea you were stuck on a deserted island with Imakura."

Maeda spoke while eating spaghetti with meatballs.

"If you'd been with a woman it could have turned into a situation like you see on television, but it must have been a horror to be there with Imakura. You're so unlucky."

That couldn't be further from the truth, but Yuichi couldn't tell him about the days of passion with Imakura on the island. Maeda wanted to hear about his tales of survival, and listened to Yuichi without interrupting.

"Still, being away from civilization close to two months means that I fell behind in the hunt for a new job. Do you know of anything?"

Maeda did not look optimistic.

"Everyone is having a hard time. I was able to force my way into a company owned by my father's friend, but Kadota and Mitani are still looking..."

He had hoped there might be other jobs that Maeda could recommend in his company, but his words made it clear that was not the case. They parted, and Yuichi sighed as he thought about how difficult this was going to be. A cloud seemed to settle above him as he thought about starting a serious search for work, but when compared to life on the deserted island

where he had to scrounge for food and everything was inconvenient, he couldn't help but think that life here, where he would never starve, water for the bath flowed at the push of a button and there was always a warm futon, was much better. He had nothing to show for his day but weariness, and he went home in a foul mood. He took his cell phone out of his coat pocket, but there was no record of Imakura calling.

"Didn't you say you were coming home this afternoon?"

The cell phone didn't answer his muttering. Thinking he still might call, he held on to his phone in the house, and even put it right outside the door when he was in the bath so he could listen for it. At 2:00 am, it still hadn't rung. The next morning he could wait no longer and called Imakura at 9:00 am. All he got was a recording saying the phone had been turned off or was out of range. Perhaps they were on the bullet train and he turned it off. He tried again every two hours, but each time the result was the same.

He still couldn't get ahold of Imakura via his cell phone the next day, or the next. It no longer made sense to think that he was on the move or that he had forgotten to turn it on. Yuichi was at a loss of what to do, but then decided to call the man's home number. It was listed in the Suginoki directory, and he found it quickly. The phone was answered by Imakura's mother Yoshie. Yuichi introduced himself and asked for Imakura, but Yoshie did not answer for a long time.

"He's not feeling well and is in bed."

Her tone was unsure.

"Is he really that sick?"

Yuichi was genuinely worried.

"His doctor said he would be fine if he slept it off for a few days. Is there something you want?"

"No, nothing in particular..."

"Goodbye then."

She hung up very suddenly. Yuichi could not hide his bewilderment as he heard the beeping from the broken connection. He thought he had been talking normally, and didn't understand why she had treated him so coolly.

After that, he called Imakura's cell phone and home phone several times, but never got through. A week later, he reached an announcement that the phone had been disconnected. They must have changed their number. He couldn't get ahold of Imakura, and he still hadn't found a job. Stress began to build so he took it out on the thing that was closest and most convenient. Shuji's wife was close to giving birth and had gone to her parents' house. In the meantime Shuji was having dinner at his parent's house. Yuichi took advantage of the situation to take jabs at him at every opportunity; it was like Shuji was his brother's punching bag. One night at dinner, Shuji yelled that it would have been better if his brother had wasted away on the island. Crying, he left for his wife's parent's house, and never returned.

Three weeks after returning from the island, his search to find a job finally paid off and Yuichi got hired by the product development department of a cosmetics company. When he found out he felt so good that he went to Imakura's house. He would say he came

by to tell him about his new job, even if that wasn't the true reason. Perhaps Imakura didn't want to see him... the thought had crossed his mind. His mother's strange behavior, the changed phone number, and the fact that Imakura had made no attempt to contact him...there was plenty to make him nervous. But there were just as many reasons to be positive as well. The phone call on the day they had separated; the way he said he wanted to hear Yuichi's voice. Those couldn't be lies.

He wanted to see Imakura and talk. If Imakura no longer wanted to see him, or had decided that he didn't like him, Yuichi wanted to hear the reasons directly from him. In fact, even if that didn't happen, he wanted to see Imakura. Imakura lived with his mother in an expensive condo.

Yuichi took a deep breath at the entrance and called on the intercom. No answer came. Thinking they might be out he waited and tried several times throughout the day. He took out his notes to make sure he didn't have the wrong address. It was the right place, and the right number. He looked up when he heard barking and saw an older woman leaving the building to walk her dog. She seemed to be about the same age as Imakura's mother.

"What a cute dog."

She smiled as he spoke.

"Thank you."

"He's looks like my brother's dog. What breed is he?"

"A toy poodle. Do you like dogs?"

"Yes, kind of."

His brother Shuji did not have a dog, and Yuichi had no interest in dogs with weird haircuts. But, he kept his salesman's smile going.

"I'm looking for the Imakuras in 508. It doesn't look like they're home."

The woman tilted her head in surprise.

"You mean the woman who lived here with her son?"

"Yes. I wanted to visit her son."

"They moved last week. Didn't you know?"

The world around Yuichi turned dark. He felt the ground spin under him for a moment.

"They'd lived here for a long time, and the decision to move seemed rather sudden..."

He couldn't speak. His expression must have given away his desperation, because the woman tried to calm him by suggesting he ask the manager to see if they left their new address. He tried but the superintendent only knew that they had moved to another place in the city and did not have any other information. Imakura had disappeared without a trace and took Yuichi's heart with him.

It was snowing on January 25, the day of the 30th wedding anniversary of Yuichi's parents. Reservations had been made at an expensive French restaurant in a hotel, but his parents were unaccustomed to high class Western food, and they sat nervously in their seats. Shuji had planned the evening hoping it would be a chance for all of them to enjoy the evening together. At first, Yuichi didn't want to go. His sister-in-

law, holding her baby, told him that Shuji also wanted to use the opportunity make up with his brother. Yuichi couldn't say no to her. It had been a year and a half since Yuichi had chased him out of the house with his abuse, and a year had passed before Shuji would even come back to his parent's house. Recently he came by every so often, and Yuichi could see he was trying to gauge his mood. If he wanted to apologize for saying that Yuichi should have died on the island, he should be a man and apologize directly instead of trying to use others to bring him around. His behavior just made Yuichi more angry, but he couldn't let his sister-in-law's efforts go to waste.

Before they went inside the restaurant, Yuichi got in the first punch. He scolded his brother for making reservations at such a popular restaurant when their parents didn't even know proper table manners. They were sure to embarrass themselves. This meant that Shuji was in a bad mood even before the food came out and they all sat around the round table without talking to each other as if it were a wake. Yuichi spent the time gazing at the snow falling outside with the sparkling city as a backdrop.

"Good evening. Would you like an aperitif?"

Their father drank only sake and knew nothing about wine. He sat as stiff and silent as a stone Buddha as the waiter smiled at him. Yuichi rubbed his eyes. He understood for the first time how hard it is to speak when shocked. The waiter had fair skin, was slightly pudgy, short, and had a high voice. He was much slimmer than Yuichi recalled but there could be no doubt. It truly was

Imakura standing there next to the table.

A year and a half had passed since they had left the island. Time can be cruel, and as the weeks passed, Yuichi began to look back at their days of passion as if they had been a dream. It had been that removed from normal life. Even though he'd yearned to see Imakura, he couldn't. He had no idea where Imakura had gone. None of their former coworkers had any information on where their former boss had found work. Yuichi had remembered that Imakura once said he liked wine, and when he saw a store that sold wine, he would walk in to look around. But of course, he never found him. As more and more days went by without hearing his voice or seeing his face, Yuichi had all but given up. He began to think that he would never be with him again. It was much easier to give up than to keep up the hope that somehow they would reunite. And yet, here he was!

Yuichi's body began to shake--from nervousness, not happiness. Imakura hadn't noticed him yet. If he had, he would have asked someone else to take the table. Or did he see Yuichi and take this table on purpose?

As Yuichi remained board stiff, his brother tried to get Imakura's attention.

"Please bring champagne and four glasses."

Imakura was looking at Shuji but his eyes caught sight of Yuichi. The moment their eyes met, Imakura went pale.

"Of...of course, sir."

He had been holding himself well but he slunk away now and escaped into the kitchen. Shuji

hadn't noticed that he was the same fat man who'd been stuck on the island with his brother. That was how thin and well kept the man had become, and how much his face had changed from the weight loss. The champagne arrived soon after, but instead of Imakura, it was brought by the beautiful sommelier. At first, Yuichi thought she was a waitress, but his brother whispered to his parents that this restaurant had a female sommelier. Imakura was keeping himself busy in other parts of the restaurant and he stayed away from their table. Yuichi couldn't enjoy his meal. His head was filled with the "truth". Imakura had been avoiding him. The broken contact, the move, they had both been on purpose. The days of passion that Yuichi had tried to forget but could not...Imakura wanted to erase it from his mind.

Imakura had been both a virgin and straight. The unique conditions they found themselves in on the island had made him lose his ability to think clearly and he had fallen under Yuichi's influence. Though he was willing to open up his body on the island, when they returned to the normal world, he came to his senses. Sex between two men was 'unclean.' Imakura severed their bond using the most basic tactic: he cut off contact. There was nothing Yuichi could've done. They had had sex, but they had not dated. Neither had said that they loved the other. Still...even though he hadn't said it, Yuichi loved Imakura; even if he was fat, had a bad personality, and had a strong mother complex. He had never doubted that they would continue their relationship once they got off the island.

Even when Imakura's mother had said that he

was too sick to talk – a clear signal – Yuichi had still held on to that one percent chance that everything was okay. He believed that they hadn't had a chance to meet because Imakura wasn't feeling well. Even as he tried to console himself, the sight of Imakura happily going about his work chipped away at him. Anger built up in him. He wasn't angry with the man who'd tried to break up with him by cutting off contact, but at himself for trying to hang on even though he knew he had been dumped.

On his way home from the restaurant, Yuichi turned back several times. He saw only the road behind him. There was no TV moment with the man he loved running after him. He felt betrayed, and by the time he got home, he was in a worse mood than before.

"Yuichi. The food...was it good?" Shuichi shyly asked as arrived at the front door. He had paid for the entire dinner.

"I don't remember..."

Yuichi didn't notice that his brother was about to cry and went straight to his room. Even after changing and lying on his bed, he couldn't get Imakura out of his head. He had to forget that he'd seen him today. He couldn't let it bother him, and it was unseemly to go after someone who had run away. Still, he had seen him...he knew where he worked. Did he really think that he could forget? Could he let it end without knowing the truth? He felt this way because there'd been no closure and Yuichi needed closure. Yuichi got out of bed and grabbed his coat.

He ran out pausing just long enough to tell his parents that he was going out, and retraced his steps back to the hotel. He got on the train, and by the time he reached the hotel, it was past 10:00. The restaurant was open until 10:30, and it would be a little after that before Imakura came out.

Walking around the hotel, he found a back entrance for employees. He took up a position a little ways away and looked up at the lights in the restaurant while shivering in the cold air. Several times he thought about leaving. He was scared of getting hurt by what might be said. If Imakura said straight to his face that he didn't like him, he probably wouldn't be able to respond.

Even after the restaurant lights were turned off Imakura did not come out the employee entrance. Every so often the door would open, but Imakura was not among the people who exited. Around midnight, a group of five men and women came out. Yuichi looked at each of them. There was the beautiful sommelier--the one who had come to their table in Imakura's place. Behind her, in the shadows, was a shorter person. He was wearing a black coat that was too long for his height. It was Imakura. He walked with the woman. Yuichi could not find the right moment to call out and started to follow behind them instead. Imakura talked to her in that familiar high voice until they separated at the station. The woman entered the station but Imakura went past it and continued walking under the raised highway. His posture revealed that he was tired from work. Yuichi closed the gap. He wanted to call out, but

he was unsure of what to say. Instead, he tapped Imakura on the shoulder. They were at a crossing and Imakura's eyes widened when he saw Yuichi.

"Long time no see." Yuichi tried to make his voice sound casual.

There was no answer from the man and the set of his jaw and lips didn't give away what he was feeling. There was no sign of happiness to see him in Imakura's tense expression. Yuichi had been right. He started to regret coming back out, but he still continued, trying to seem calm and cool.

"I'm on my way to a friends place. It looked like you from behind."

He didn't want him to know he had been stalking him. That's why he lied.

"This is quite a string of coincidences. You were at the restaurant earlier as well. I was surprised to see you working as a waiter, and a sommelier on top of that. You had said that you dreamed about becoming one once."

He saw the crosswalk light turn from green to red in the corner of his eye. Imakura did not move for several minutes.

"I found a job in the product development department of a cosmetics company. It's interesting, but it doesn't pay as good as my old job."

Imakura still stood motionless and did not speak. He looked down slightly, exposing the white skin on his neck to the street lights. Snow fell on it, and melted to the touch.

"Did you drink your Romani Conti? You had

said you were going to have some when we finally got off the island."

The light turned green. It bothered Yuichi that they were not going to take the opportunity to cross, but Imakura remained motionless and silent. The light turned red again. The two of them stood at the crosswalk as a tense silence fell; neither said a word. He'd run out of small talk so Yuichi had nothing left but to stare silently at Imakura's down-turned head. 'Just keep ignoring me,' he thought. 'That'll make it easier for me to give up. But as long as you're here, I will be, too.'

Finally Yuichi couldn't take it any more. "Don't just stand there. Say something..."

Imakura's body was shaking.

"You have something to say to me, don't you?" Yuichi took the man's hands and held them tight.

"If you don't like me, say so. Tell me you never want to see my face again. I'll be fine saying goodbye for the last time right here. I don't have to see you again. That's the way love is sometimes." Each word made his heart colder and colder. The snow brought a chill to the rest of his body. "We were alone on the island. You probably felt like you had no choice but to do as I said. You never loved me. When we got back, you began to doubt whether what we had done there was right or not. That's fine. I understand."

Imakura finally raised his face. His nose and face were bright red and he was crying. Out of habit, Yuichi wiped his eyes with his thumb...just like he used to do on the island.

"Why are you crying? I haven't said anything

that should make you cry. I came tonight certain that you were going to dump me." Yuichi spoke honestly.

"I really like you. Even though there was a time when I thought you were fat and had a horrible personality, once we lived together, I saw how honest and straightforward, and cute, you were. Even though I said I was trying to teach you how to have sex, I really did it because I wanted to have sex with you."

Imakura began to sob. He repeated 'Yu-chan' over and over in a low voice. Hearing this, Yuichi had a hard time maintaining his composure. He began to wonder if perhaps Imakura really did like him.

"Just come right out and say it. Say you never want to see me again, or that that you hate me. Send me away. If you do, I will never bother you again."

Imakura didn't say any of these things, but neither did he say that he liked Yuichi. He just fidgeted uncomfortably. Yuichi's chest burned with the desire to know how he really felt. Imakura lifted his face and sniffed loudly.

"It was mama...mama said I couldn't." His voice was just barely audible. "She asked me about the island. I tried to keep my mouth shut but it all came out. Mama got very angry and said that you were a mean man who had tempted me...she was so angry and said that I was to never do anything like that again." Imakura rubbed his tear-moistened face and went on. "I knew that you had been calling, but mama forbade me to talk to you. Then she suddenly said that we were moving. She threw away the Suginoki address book so I wouldn't know where you lived. She also changed the

number of my cell phone and erased your number from its memory."

That's why they never met. As he listened, Yuichi calmed down from his previously agitated state.

"If you wanted to see me, there were ways you could have found my address. You could have asked someone else from the company for my phone number. There are still people at the office taking care of things. It would have been easy for them to look up my address. You used your mother as an excuse not to do any of those things. You may have sincerely wanted to see me, but you can't disobey your mother. She's more important to you than me."

He wanted Imakura to say he was wrong, but he didn't. He only continued with his excuses.

"Mama remarried. You even know who her new husband is. The man from the ornithological institute in Miyagi. She used to say that I was the most important person to her, that I was her life, but she found someone else and ran away to Miyagi, leaving me here. It's so unfair of her to say that I couldn't see you even while she's living with the man she loves."

This was something Imakura should have said directly to his mother instead of out here on the street. He looked up at Yuichi as if hoping for sympathy, but Yuichi's gaze was still cool.

"You feel safe when you listen to your mother, and are always happy with what she says. As long as she loves you, all is right with the world."

Imakura's mouth betrayed his confused feelings. Snowflakes fell on his lips as he looked up.

"I think I'll just keep looking for someone who'll tell me I'm the most important thing in their life." Tears welled up in Imakura's eyes, making his pupils look like a pond in which someone had thrown a stone. "But I...I wanted to see you so much, Yu-chan."

"I wanted to see you, too. I wanted it so much that I dreamt about it. But if this happens every time your mother objects, we'll be back to square one. I can't have that."

Though their relationship would be over, he felt that that would be better than going through an ordeal over and over.

"Let's just call it quits."

Yuichi regretted saying it the instant the words came out of his mouth. But as long as Imakura could not graduate from 'mama,' their relationship could never flourish.

"I really, really wanted to see you."

Imakura's feelings seemed genuine, but Yuichi didn't want to have to go through the same pain he had felt for a year and a half every time Imakura's mother came back into the picture. Yuichi turned his back to Imakura and started to walk away. He wished they had never been rescued from the island. They could have lived there happily ever after. They would have taken care of each other, and loved each other...But this was reality. After walking several meters, he got a funny feeling on his back. It was being touched. White fingers slid over his belly. They were...the fingers of the one he loved.

"Let go."



Imakura's body was close, and his voice was high pitched.

"No. Never again. Not even if I should die."

Yuichi didn't understand why Imakura came after him. Perhaps he didn't want the man he loved getting away and wasn't thinking of the consequences or what might come later. But that was fine. Yuichi had a knot in his stomach. 'It's your own fault that you're unhappy. It's your own fault that you're crying. You may say you will never let go even if you die, but you were the one who brought this on yourself.' His thoughts tormented him and forced Yuichi to push away Imakura's hand as he turned.

"I will only say this once, and give you one chance to answer. You have to choose between your mother and me right now. If you choose your mother, I will never have anything to do with you again. If you choose me, I will never let you go back to your mother again." His words were sharp as a surgeon's stroke, but were necessary.

"It is your choice."

Snow still fell lightly and several cars passed. Imakura looked down and was silent. But it turned out that he was just sneezing. He finally looked up, sniffled, and laughed even as he looked as though he were about to cry.

"I choose you." His voice was low, but Imakura spoke with conviction.

They hugged, ignoring the stares of onlookers. Yuichi had no intention of ever letting go of the man who had chosen him. In his head, he swore he would never

let him go back to his mother, even if he demanded. After kissing him lightly on the ear, he whispered that he wanted to go to Imakura's place. "Warm me," he said. It was a clear come on.

Imakura nodded slightly and the two walked arm in arm through the snow. Imakura lived on the fifth floor of a seven-story apartment building not far from the highway. He opened the door. The second he heard the door close, Yuichi gave his lover a rib-cracking hug.

"Yu-chan..."

He kissed him hard, but Imakura stayed pressed up against him and did not flee. Yuichi wanted him so bad so he pushed him onto the floor. He pulled off his sweater and undershirt and kissed his soft skin. He licked his pale nipples and then sucked them hard.

"Ahh...nnn..."

His sensitive body started to shiver. Yuichi was too impatient to take off all of his clothes. His shaking fingers pulled down Imakura's zipper, and his right hand slid down into his underwear. His fingers grasped his small but stiff penis. But something was different...Yuichi pulled down his slacks and underwear in one swoop. Looking down, he was surprised to see a pink tip and no foreskin.

"You had surgery?"

Yuichi lightly pinched the tip making Imakura's whole body quiver.

"Yeah..."

He felt angry that Imakura had changed without him knowing. Yuichi grabbed his penis roughly and Imakura let out a loud yelp.

"Who said you could do that to yourself?"
"Yu-chan..."

"This is mine. All mine. How could you do that without telling me?"

He squeezed over and over. Imakura cried large tears and yelled out "I'm sorry" several times.

"If you don't like it, I'll have surgery again to change it back. I'm so sorry...so sorry..."

Not like that was even possible...but his words got Yuichi so hot that he could barely hold back.

"Fine. I forgive you this time. But remember, your body is mine. Don't do anything to it without telling me."

"Okay...Okay..."

They kissed in the cold, dark hallway. The next thing he knew, they were both naked and holding each other, laying on top of coats that were now stained with semen. They showered together, and climbed into bed naked. They couldn't stop holding each other...touching each other...

"You're very soft here."

Yuichi pressed against the area that had so lovingly accepted his hard cock. It had a distinct heat that was different from anywhere else.

"What happened? Were you masturbating when I wasn't around?"

Imakura blushed and buried his face in his pillow.

"You were, weren't you?"

Yuichi took Imakura's finger and forced it down there.

"No...don't..."

"What? Even though you were doing it yourself?"

"I...I haven't..."

Yuichi placed Imakura's finger next to his and pushed them both in. Still slick with semen, it accepted both fingers without resistance. As Yuichi moved the fingers around, Imakura moaned slightly and his breathing quickened.

"I like your fingers better..."

Imakura took his own finger out.

"My fingers are so small, they don't reach as far as yours do."

"See. You were playing with yourself."

Imakura looked like he was about to cry at being found out, but he bit down softly on Yuichi's thumb when he brought his hand up to caress his cheek. As Yuichi pulled it away, he reached out with his tongue for more.

"What were you doing while we were apart?" Imakura asked while being cradled in Yuichi's arms.
"Did you masturbate too?"

He had been very reliant on his right hand, but he was not about to tell Imakura the truth and smiled.

"I had no problem finding others. I had sex quite often while you were ignoring me."

Imakura looked like he was about to cry yet again but something else showed on his face.

"Liar."

"I am not. All I have to do is wave my hand and they come running."

Imakura fidgeted in his arms.

"What? You're angry? You're the one who left me, you know."

"But you're the only one...I've only done it with you..."

It was cute how his shoulders heaved when he cried. He crawled into a ball, and Yuichi hugged him from above.

"It is a lie," he whispered in his ear. "I haven't slept with anyone else. You're the only one for me. Don't get so angry."

He kissed his neck and hairline to prove his innocence. Imakura relaxed and looked back at Yuichi.

"Never fall in love with anyone else...always be my Yu-chan."

Though he was five years older, his spoiled child tone made Yuichi's heart race.

"If you're good and never cheat on me, I will love you forever. I will tell you I love you my whole life."

"Deal."

He nodded several times and nuzzled Yuichi like a cat. Then Imakura suddenly got serious.

"Will you be here in the morning?"

"Yes."

"You aren't going home?"

"No."

He seemed relieved by this answer.

"I dreamt about you all the time. I was so happy to see you...but then I would wake up and I'd be so lonely. I thought that I would rather never dream again

if this was all I had to look forward to, but everything is fine now because it's not a dream. When I open my eyes, I won't be alone."

He again nuzzled Yuichi's chest and closed his eyes in contentment. They kissed over and over, and fell asleep tangled in each other.

Yuichi was the first to awaken. He blinked at the unfamiliar ceiling and surroundings. As he came to, he remembered that he was in Imakura's apartment. The man he had loved over and over last night was lying next to him. He pulled up the sheets hoping to see his naked body, but the cold made Imakura curl up like a cat. His body was covered with evidence of their love-making. When Yuichi touched Imakura's shoulder and hips ever so softly, his lover let out a quick sneeze. Pulling the sheets over them quickly, they hugged. They whispered sweet nothings as they clung tightly to each other. When he licked the lips that he had bruised, Imakura whimpered slightly and buried his head in Yuichi's chest. He loved him so much he could barely stand it, and he cradled his head possessively. The sweet, quiet morning atmosphere was broken by the ringing of the phone next to the bed. Imakura did not move to answer it.

"The phone is ringing..."

Imakura just shook his head and kept his eyes closed tight. The clock said that it was after 9:00 am. He didn't seem to have an answering machine because the phone just kept ringing. Thinking he didn't want Imakura to miss an important call from work, Yuichi picked it up. If it was work related, he would take a message.

"Hello."

"Good morning, Takashi."

It was the voice of a composed woman, the woman who had been so cold to him on the phone many times before. He felt the blood drain from his body.

"What's wrong with your voice? Have you caught a cold?"

Yuichi quickly shook Imakura awake and put the phone to his ear.

"Oh. Mama...good morning."

The voice on the other end was so loud that Yuichi could hear it.

"Um...that was..."

As Imakura stumbled to find the words, his mother figured out what was going on. Her voice became sharper.

"Yes...yes, mama...yes, but..." Imakura could not get a word in edgewise and finally just sat there listening. His expression got progressively darker. Looking down, he bit his lip.

"Despite what you say, mama, Yu-chan is not a bad person."

The hand that held the phone began to shake uncontrollably.

"And, besides...I love Yu-chan...so..."

Yuichi put his hand on Imakura's and lifting his head, whispered that he would talk to her if need be. He knew it would be just like adding fuel to a fire, but he could not bear the sight of Imakura taking the abuse.

"No...I'll take care of it."

Imakura shook his head and tightened his grip

on the receiver.

"Don't worry mama, I'll be fine. I know myself..." He stopped and his expression stiffened. He sat motionless with the stiff expression as he hung up.

"What did she say?"

"She's coming down from Miyagi."

He slumped back onto the bed as if a taught string had been cut and started to cry. Yuichi held him and gently rubbed his head. Imakura had done the best that he could... Yuichi understood.

"I'm really going to get it." He didn't let go of Yuichi as he spoke. "But no matter what she says, even if she disowns me, I want to be with you."

After a long, long kiss, Imakura said in a low voice, "I'm sorry, mama."

The End

Present

He felt like his body was floating and his vision was blurry. The voices were far away. Just as everything faded out, the familiar ceiling and lights came into focus.

Takashi Imakura looked left and right as he rubbed his eyes. He finally realized that he'd been dreaming. He was relieved, but a little embarrassed as well. He rolled over and fixed his bangs. The clock next to his bed read 7:15. It was after 2:00 when he went to bed. 'Just a little bit more' he thought as he pulled the sheets up.

When he rolled over, his nose hit something warm. There was that reassuring smell. Bringing his face close and closing his eyes, a finger touched his cheek. Imakura thought he'd been sleeping. The finger tickled and he started giggling.

The finger moved down to his chin. It lifted his face, and he came eye to eye with his boyfriend, Yuichi Higashiyama. Even though he was unshaven and his eyes were only half open, Imakura thought he was handsome. That handsome face gradually came closer and kissed him.

The finger that had been caressing his face moved to his back, and Yuichi hugged him just a bit too hard. They had been kissing softly, but suddenly Yuichi's thick tongue moved past his teeth and into his

mouth. It wrapped around Imakura's tongue. The wet, sloppy kiss was more than his sleepy head could take, and it was hard to breathe.

When Yuichi finally let go, his head was light from the lack of oxygen. He swallowed the spit in his mouth, not knowing if it was his or his lover's. He wiped his wet lips, but when Yuichi started to nibble on his ear and whisper 'Imakura', it sent chills down his spine.

It had been three months since they started living together, but his lover still called him politely by his last name. He said that it would be okay to use his first name, but Yuichi replied that he was comfortable the way it was. Still, when they were making love, there were times when he called out 'Takashi'. He was not used to hearing it and it made his lover seem like another person, and that sometimes made him lose his rhythm.

"Do you want me?"

Yuichi pressed his knee into Imakura's unprotected crotch. It was as if he were ridiculing his erect penis, and Imakura blushed.

"N...no..."

He shook his head adamantly. He saw his lover looking up at him from below.

You were hard when you pressed up against me. I thought you were pressing up against my thigh because you wanted some."

Imakura was embarrassed by such dirty talk so early in the morning.

"I was dreaming, and..."

His lover snorted and jumped on top of him.

"What kind of dream?"

He grabbed his head as he asked. When Imakura stayed silent and closed his eyes, he just asked again.

"Were you dreaming about me?"

Imakura's eyes opened in shock. "How did you know?"

Yuichi grinned as if he had just been lucky with his guess. "What was I doing in your dream?"

He said nothing because he didn't want to tell. Whenever Imakura clammed up, Yuichi always squinted his right eye.

"I see you're not willing to talk...unless I do this!"

Before he was even done speaking, he was tickling Imakura's armpits.

"Don't...stop...stop."

His armpits and feet were especially sensitive. He tried rolling over the bed to escape, but Yuichi didn't give up, so he had to capitulate. Breathing heavy, he confessed.

"We were doing it."

His lover blushed as he listened.

"Where?"

"The restaurant..."

"How?"

He glared up at his lover. He didn't want the conversation to go this far.

"It was before opening, and I was the only one there. You suddenly appeared, and even though I said it was too late because customers were coming, you took me to a table in the back and..."

Speaking the words out loud had embarrassed him and his voice was soft. He licked his lips and when he looked up, their eyes met.

"You certainly are a freak."

He frowned like he did when he ate something he didn't like.

"You're the freak. I said no, but you still..."

Yuichi shook his shoulders in an over the top fashion.

"I may have forced you, but it was the me inside your head. Apparently this is something you fantasize about. You must want to screw me at your workplace."

He could only shake his head at Yuichi's bold words.

"I've never thought of such a thing."

Even though he denied it, Yuichi just sat there with his arms crossed glaring at him.

"You want to do something exciting with me. You want to do it someplace where there's a danger of being seen by others. Shall we try it in the park at night?"

It didn't sound like a joke, but when Imakura loudly said 'no!' and threw out his legs, the sheets that had been covering his lower half fell to the floor. They were both stark naked on the bed. His lover licked his lower lip like a wild carnivore and inched closer.

Yuichi's hand was hot on his knee. He tried to prevent his legs from being opened, but Yuichi just doubled his efforts. His legs were opened wider than he normally liked. He was embarrassed and tried to cover

his face with his hands, but Yuichi gradually positioned himself on top of him. His moist tip was already pressed up against him.

"You want to fool around now?" he said in a high pitch.

As an answer, Yuichi thrust. He felt himself open up, but his hips protested.

"I don't like it in the morning..."

Yuichi whispered, "You'd let this go to waste" in his ear as he lightly pinched his erect penis. His hips began to tingle.

"It will go down if I go to the bathroom. I'd rather do that than to have my hips hurt all day..."

Yuichi gently brushed his bangs as he complained and kissed his forehead.

"I'll be gentle. If you do your part, it'll be over in no time."

Yuichi held him tight and repeatedly whispered 'please' in his ear. He moved his hips as if pounding on Imakura with his hard penis was asking to be let in. But if they had sex in the morning, he sometimes hurt down there all day long. It made it uncomfortable to sit or walk. That was why he resisted. He thought Yuichi would give up if he was adamant, but...

Putting his hand on his lover's back, Imakura closed his eyes. It's not like it hurt, and he could put up with the discomfort...

"Just don't take too long. I don't like being rocked back and forth."

"Okay."

When Yuichi's penis penetrated, Imakura

reflexively let out his breath. He knew from experience that it was only uncomfortable at the beginning and that it only got better after that.

"It's all in."

He felt hot breath on his ear.

"You're so good. You take me all in."

Imakura blushed at the play by play.

"Can't you tell?"

Yuichi pushed his nail into Imakura's erect penis, and he moaned with pleasure. He quickly covered his mouth. He caught a glimpse of Yuichi's happy expression and felt somewhat vexed.

He rocked back and forth holding both knees. The numbness in the bottom half of his body caused by the friction was gradually spreading throughout the rest of his body. He felt as if he was drunk. Plus, it was hotter down there than usual. Why...

"Yu-chan...did you put on a condom?"

The rocking stopped and Yuichi grinned wide.

"I forgot. But don't worry. I won't come inside you."

He started to move his hips fast and there was no time to think. After one last forceful thrust, his lover started to shake and Imakura felt hot semen inside him. Immediately after, Imakura also came. When Yuichi pulled out, Imakura glared at him.

"You liar. You said you wouldn't cum inside."

Even though he was genuinely angry, Yuichi hugged him hard and kissed him, and the anger faded.

"I held it as long as I could. But then you squeezed at the last moment. I couldn't hold it any longer."



He couldn't remember the climax and could only reply, "oh..."

"It's too much when you squeeze like that. You shouldn't grip me so hard."

Imakura had no recollection, but he could not deny that it might have happened that way. And he couldn't be angry if it was his fault. All he could do was sulk.

"I have a little bit of time before I go to work. Let's take a shower. I'll clean you up."

"...Okay..."

Yuichi carried him to the bathroom. On the way, he felt a drip and thought that he wouldn't be able to hold it in, and when he told Yuichi, suddenly he felt a finger plugging him up. He gasped loudly, but Yuichi coolly said, "I'm just keeping it from leaking. Did that feel good?"

Imakura had no idea that a second round of lovemaking was waiting for him in the bathroom.

"Cherbourg," the restaurant where Imakura worked, was located on the 34th floor of the Jackson Hotel, which was close to Roppongi Station. The hotel had opened recently and had many overseas guests because it was a part of a foreign chain.

The interior of Cherbourg had been designed by Owen, a Swede, and its masterful mixture of wood and metal gave it a modernistic but cozy feel. Imakura liked looking at the restaurant when it was empty. It was designed to look beautiful even when there was no human presence.

There was no one on the floor when Imakura

Showed up for work at 4:00. Though the young cooking staff could be heard busily preparing for dinner in the kitchen they were not visible from the floor. Cherbourg was open for lunch from noon to 2 pm, but its menu was limited to two entrees and three wines, so there was no reason for the sommelier and wine expert to be there. Night was the main event.

Imakura put his things in his locker and changed into his uniform. When he tightened his bow tie his back automatically straightened and he was ready for work.

First he checked the reservation list in the small office. If the guests had dined with them before he looked up their previous wine orders and came up with several recommendations for tonight's meal. For new customers who chose the *prix fixe* menu he drew up a more orthodox list of wines.

After he finished creating his wine recommendations he headed for the wine cellar. Opening the heavy doors he went inside. As always it was dark and a little chilly. With the door closed, it was silent inside, and it felt like he was in a different world. It was completely soundproofed. He checked the temperature and humidity, cleaned the cellar, and counted the inventory.

Imakura wished they'd increase their budget for wine, but the restaurant manager had refused. He'd showed skill at finding good, inexpensive wines, but the more expensive brands had a certain character and taste, and a deepness that the inexpensive wines couldn't match. He wanted as many people to experience them

as possible, but customers were also restricted by their budget, and so there were few opportunities to offer better choices.

After counting the inventory Imakura found that they were running lower than normal on rosé. It was easy to drink, went with anything and was very inexpensive, so they tended to run out of it quicker than other varietals. He added a number of bottles of rosé to the order list and left the cellar. Though checking and cleaning the cellar and recommending wines to customers was usually the job of the sommelier, Cherbourg only had one, so as hall staff and wine expert, Imakura helped in that capacity. As he walked down the narrow linoleum hallway used by employees, he heard someone hurrying behind him.

"Imakura! Sorry I'm late!"

He turned and saw the sommelier Miki Ogawa running towards him. She looked as though she'd just arrived, and was still wearing a light green coat as she scurried along.

"It was my day to check the cellar."

Looking at his watch, he noticed that it was almost 4:30. She was a half hour late. Imakura sighed with resignation.

"Don't worry. I've already done it. All's that's left is the glass check."

"I'm really sorry."

Miki joined her hands in front of her face and bowed in apology. The sommelier was seven years younger than Imakura, and bad at managing her time. This wasn't the first time she was late, but he wasn't

angry. She was never later than a half hour and very serious when it came to actual work.

Imakura couldn't help but think that he'd become much more tolerant. He used to hate people who were late, and he'd saved two or three extra verbal abuses for them. He used to get jealous when he saw someone earning more than him, or when someone did a better job than him, and was always mean to them. He was constantly this way at his former job in the pharmaceutical company, and there were times when he was turned off by his own behavior.

When the pharmaceutical company went bankrupt, he suddenly had the chance to change to a career he enjoyed, and this did wonders for his personality. In his old position, he had constantly tortured himself over his lack of self-confidence, but here he was recognized for his abilities. He gained confidence. Once he was comfortable with himself, he noticed that he could be kind to others.

"I was up late last night drinking with friends and overslept," Miki confessed.

"We got off work around midnight. You went out after that?" Imakura was surprised and impressed by her stamina, although he was keenly aware of the differences between the body of a twenty-something and that of a thirty-year old such as himself. He was short and had a young face, so people often mistook him for being in his twenties, but Imakura was thirty-two. Even so, he was still a newbie to the restaurant business since he'd only been working in it for a year and a half.

Miki was the only sommelier at Cherbourg

because the former sommelier had died in an accident. The young woman had been a co-sommelier and was in France on a study trip at the time but was hired by the restaurant after a quick search. She was the daughter of rich vineyard owner in Yamanashi Prefecture, and though she would often say that she didn't know much, but the truth was there were very few who had a better nose and palate when it came to tasting.

Imakura was hired around the same time as hall staff in a training position for future sommeliers. Even though he had never worked at a restaurant before he was hired because of his extensive knowledge of wine and unique ability to pair wines with food.

The more expensive the restaurant, the more management wanted experienced staff. But the main chef of Cherbourg was only thirty. He was not as bound by tradition and was known for his ability to come up with revolutionary ideas for French food that matched the palate of Japanese customers. Instead of a stiff sommelier that favored traditional picks, the management wanted someone who could pick wine that went well with the food and satisfied the customers without being too outrageous in price. That is why they had chosen Miki and Imakura. -

Miki clasped her hand and giggled.

"Yesterday was the opening of a new bar by the owners of the place where my friend works. They even put out Dom Perignon. And vintage at that!"

"Really?"

Imakura got caught up in her story. In good harvest years they would use more than the usual

amount of grapes in making Don Perignon. These so-called "vintages" went for four to five times the normal price for a bottle.

"I'm jealous. I've only had vintage once." Imakura sighed, and Miki looked as if she were trying to remember the taste.

"It was very good. The bar was cool as well. They go beyond the normal cocktails and have a good stock of wine. We should go sometime."

"Sure...but, Miki. You need to change. If the manager sees you, he'll get on your case for being late again."

Miki scurried past Imakura. After a few steps, she stopped and turned back.

"Did you take a shower before work?"

"Yes."

She laughed through her nose.

"I can smell your shampoo. It's Eliair by Carvy, right? My friend uses it. Do you like Eliair?"

"Someone gave it to me. I don't really know."

Miki didn't stop there.

"You live alone, don't you? Isn't it strange to be using shampoo someone gave to you? Whose house did you shower at?"

"Huh? Wh-what do you mean?" Imakura stuttered and blushed. He buried his face in the wine order sheet.

"Why does what I do matter? We've had this problem before...your questions could be considered sexual harassment."

Miki giggled into her hand and declared

herself to be just like a dirty old man.

"You certainly are straightforward." He was being completely played by a younger woman. Trying to change the subject and regain his status as the elder in the relationship, Imakura straightened his back and cleared his throat.

"Enough about me...I've checked the cellar and we are short on rosé. I thought I'd order more. In addition to our normal stock of Tavel and Mateus, I want to get some California rosé as well."

Miki brought her index finger to her cheek.

"You mean wine from that California winery you like? The one that's dry and has the fragrance of roses? It was both popular and inexpensive. I liked it too. Sounds good to me."

"I'll order it today."

Her nose and palate might be the best, but Miki was not a very organized person, and the ordering was usually left to Imakura. She didn't care how cheap the wine was, or if it was an unknown brand, but she was particular about taste, so he had to be careful.

"Oops. The manager..."

Through the open door to the corridor, they could see their manager, Mr. Tani, the "smiling demon," crossing the floor. Miki ran off quicker than a rabbit to the changing room. Mr. Tani looked into the corridor, but he didn't notice her.

Imakura went to the office and picked up the phone. If he ordered the rosé today it would be here by tomorrow afternoon. He dialed his favorite wholesaler, but they were busy and he had to wait. Just as he was

thinking it was taking a long time, he noticed that his hips were getting numb. After rolling around on the sheets, they had done it once more in the bathroom...because Yuichi had gotten aroused while cleaning Imakura.

Though there were times when he was not very nice his lover was mostly a kind man. When he thought about the times they had sex, his heart started to race. He truly felt that he was loved.

They had been boss and employee at the pharmaceutical company. Finding themselves left behind on a deserted island, they were forced to live together and depend on each other to survive, and after a while they fell in love. Now they lived together and were very much in love, but it hadn't all been smooth sailing. When they were finally rescued from the island, Imakura had returned to find that their company had gone bankrupt and that his mother didn't approve of their relationship at all. Imakura and his mother were all each other had, and from an early age she had taught him to keep nothing secret from her. It didn't take long for him to spill the beans about his relationship with Yuichi, and she yelled at him so loudly he thought that he'd been struck by lightning.

"But Yu-chan is a good man!" He argued meekly and to no avail.

"Would a good man seduce a 'man' like you?"

He hadn't been seduced. It had happened naturally. But his mother wouldn't hear a word of it.

"I...I love him."

"You've been a fool. You've let a gay man play you."

Even though Imakura trusted Yuichi, hearing over and over that he'd been 'played' made him gradually began to believe it himself. He was also afraid that if he continued to say that he loved Yuichi, his mother would disown him. He was at least going to try to cut off contact until his mother's anger subsided, but then he found that Yuichi's number had been erased from his cell phone without his knowledge. His company address book was also missing, but he couldn't muster up the courage to ask his mother about it. He was sure she would ask why he wanted it. Then, one day she suddenly announced that they were moving. He thought that was the end of it. He had no way to combat his mother's crusade to rid him of Yuichi.

Now unemployed, Imakura began studying wine in earnest. He had always wanted to do so, and now he had an excuse to get other things off his mind. He went to wine class in the afternoon, and tasting after tasting at night. He didn't even look for another job, but thought only of wine...even though he was afraid his mother might get angry. She on the other hand seemed to be occupied with a new relationship, and each weekend she would dress up and head out.

Everything was fine when he was busy with wine, but before he went to bed each night, he would remember his time on the island. The way they kissed and slept while holding each other, all away from the prying eyes of the world. There were times when he couldn't hold back the tears. How could he be so sad if it wasn't really "love"?

Around the end of what had been a lonely

autumn, his mother shyly announced that she was getting married...to the bearded man from the ornithology institute. The same man from the pair of bird watchers Imakura and Yuichi had ridden on the boat with to the island. Because his mother had raised him alone since his father died his feelings were complicated. He wanted to be happy for her, but he didn't know if he could be.

"You refused to let me love the man I want, but then you do this? How is that man different from Yu-chan?" Or so he wanted to say to her.

At first, his mother insisted that he accompany her to Miyagi, but the bearded man told him, "You're a grown man. You should do what you want to do."

When she announced their plans to marry, Imakura proclaimed that he was going to stay in Tokyo and continue learning about wine, but his mother tearfully pleaded with him. If she was going to be that dramatic, he thought he would go. But when her fiancé said it wasn't necessary, she changed her mind so quickly that it almost felt like a slap in the face. It was quite a shock. He realized that now the ornithologist was more important to her than he was.

At first, living alone made him terribly lonely, and he tried to fill the void with wine. He didn't do this because he missed his mother, but because he wanted to see Yuichi. But he was too scared to. He could find out his address and phone number by contacting other ex-coworkers, but he hadn't contacted him in four months. Yuichi was kind, but he must have given up on him by now. If he searched for him and found him only to be told it was already over, he didn't think he'd ever recover.

He had surgery to remove his foreskin. He at least wanted to get rid of the main source of his insecurity. It didn't make his penis any bigger, but when he looked at the pinkish tip for the first time, he finally felt like he was looking at his true self.

In early December, he was hired by Cherbourg. He was lucky and he knew it, so he didn't stop studying. There were times when his inexperience led to poor customer service, and he was unhappy when scolded, but there were just as many happy times. He threw himself into his work over the next year and had begun to think less about his lover when suddenly in mid-January they met again.

His mother found out about their reunion almost immediately. Though Imakura was worried that she would be angry and shun him, Yuichi was calm and collected. Even though Imakura's mother heaped abuse on his lover, Yuichi stood his ground. He didn't even say a word when she slapped him. Seeing him act so manly almost made Imakura embarrassed at his own nervousness.

"I love Yu-chan and there is nothing you can say to change that."

He was able to actually say this thanks to the courage that Yuichi had given him. His mother cried as she returned to Miyagi and they did not communicate for a while. She had started to call again recently, but they never talked about Yuichi. It seemed that she still hadn't accepted that her son's lover was a man.

The two men thrown together by fate on the island wanted to see each other and make love every day

like old times. This naturally led to them living together. They would kiss endlessly each night and sleep in the same bed. He felt loved when Yuichi caressed his hair and body. As they murmured their "I love yous" their feelings deepened. He became gentler...

The wholesalers voice boomed, "Thanks for waiting." Imakura snapped to out of the daydream he was lulled into by the recorded music. He put in his order while checking the sheet and was told that it would arrive tomorrow afternoon. After hanging up, he entered the types of wine, number of bottles and prices into the computer. Once the order was finished and he was catching his breath, the phone started to ring. Thinking it was the wholesaler, he picked it up.

"Thank you for calling Cherbourg. How can I help you?"

After a short silence, he heard the voice of his lover asking, "Imakura?"

"Yu-chan?"

"Oh. It is you."

He had just been thinking about his lover, and now simply hearing his voice made his heart race.

"What's wrong? You've never called me at work before."

"I'm sorry to bother you when you're busy, and this is rather sudden, but is there any way I could make a reservation for seven or eight people tomorrow night?"

Imakura quickly found the reservation list. It was very full, but if they shuffled some tables, they should be able to handle eight.

"It could work."

He heard the sigh of relief on the other end.

"Thank you. My boss wanted a celebration dinner at the spur of the moment and we couldn't think of anywhere else to hold it. She is very particular and refuses to eat at places that don't have good food. I thought your restaurant would be perfect."

Imakura was happy he would consider his restaurant, but then he lowered his voice to a whisper. "You know we're kind of expensive. Is that ok?"

Yuichi laughed on the other end.

"You remember how I told you that those products our department created were popular? Well, the president threw a little bonus our way. Price isn't a consideration this time."

Imakura was relieved.

"What would you like to eat? Or will you decide when you get here?"

"Everybody has things they like or don't like. We'll all order separately from the menu."

"Understood. I have your reservation for eight people at 7 p.m. tomorrow night." He ended the transaction professionally. His lover giggled, but he also had a question.

"Can we request a particular hall staff?"

"We don't normally do that, but I will attend to your table."

"I can't wait. Oh, and have a great night at work."

Imakura hung up. All of a sudden, his motivation to work picked up. He was happy that Yuichi

had thought about him in his time of need. He wanted to present them with a wine that would make his finicky boss say "delicious". If he could do that, it might help Yuichi look better in the eyes of his boss as well.

He played out a number of wine-food combinations in his head. In addition to how a wine matched a certain plate, personal tastes were also considered: did they like dry or sweet wine, light or heavier ones? If she chose beef, he would go with a traditional medoc...he mumbled as he walked down the corridor when he heard his name called from behind. Turning around, he saw the sommelier Miki cleaning wine glasses with a cloth.

"Do we have a 1985 Chateau Haut Brion?"

"Yes", he replied while stopping.

"We have a couple coming in tonight to celebrate their wedding anniversary. If it fits in their budget, I'd like to serve it. That was the year they were married. Wouldn't it be romantic?"

"That would be great. '85 was a good year as well."

Exiting to the floor, Imakura mused on the idea of a wedding anniversary. A lot of their guests were celebrating either anniversaries or birthdays. He started to wonder when Yuichi's birthday was. Even though they'd lived together for three months, he hadn't thought to ask.

He thought it would be nice to put on a big celebration. He wanted to make him very happy. He'd ask when he got home tonight.

"Imakura. We're about to start the meeting."

Mr. Tani, the smiling demon, called to him. Imakura returned to work mode and headed to the room where the meeting was to be held.

His shift was over, and when he exited from the employees' entrance, the cold stung his cheeks. Even though it was the end of April, it was still chilly at night. Having brought only a light jacket Imakura was forced to hunch over to stay warm. After dropping Miki off at the station Imakura walked under the raised highway. Small cherry blossom trees along the road were in bloom and they swayed in the breeze.

It was 1 a.m. by the time he got home. The light was still on in the entrance. In the living room, he found Yuichi asleep on the sofa with a thick book resting on his chest.

"I'm home."

Yuichi lifted his head slowly at his voice. When their eyes met, he smiled.

"Welcome back. I bet it's cold outside."

"Yeah. It's warm during the day but still cold at night."

Yuichi beckoned him with his hand and Imakura obliged him. Taking Imakura's right hand, he said "You're so cold." He brought it to his cheek.

"You're warm."

"That's because I've been inside. Come here. I'll warm you up."

Imakura was drawn in and sat on his lover's knees. Yuichi hugged him tightly. His eyes closed halfway, lulled by the warmth, but a sudden caress on

the back of the neck made a shiver go up his spine.

"You had this on you."

Lifting his head, he saw Yuichi holding a soft pink flower petal.

"I walked past cherry blossom trees on my way home."

Yuichi teased his lips with the petal and then put it in his mouth.

"Did you swallow it?"

"It tastes like cherry blossoms."

"Really?"

As if to prove it, Yuichi lightly kissed him. He couldn't taste the petal, but it was still sweet. They continued to kiss, and it felt good when Yuichi caressed his hair and back with his warm fingers. Imakura closed his eyes half way like a purring cat. He felt like he could have sex right now...he wanted to have sex right now, but Yuichi didn't seem to be in the mood as he made no attempt to touch him deep inside.

"Go warm up in the bath."

"Um..."

Still longing to be touched, he rocked on top of Yuichi's knees. He tried to think of something to say so he wouldn't have to move, and then remembered...

"That's right. I got you a table, but it's in the back. You'll be able to see the view, but still..."

"Anywhere is fine. I'm sorry for asking you at such a late date. And it's easier to talk in back because you don't have to worry as much about other people."

Imakura breathed a sigh of relief at this response. His manager had been really angry when he

found out that Imakura had added the late reservation. It had been hard rearranging the tables, but it was for his lover. Imakura didn't want to disappoint him when he got home.

"I was wondering...when's your birthday?"

His lover blinked and tilted his head.

"My birthday?"

"Yes. What day?"

Not sure what to think, Yuichi replied that it was May 14th. That was only two weeks away!

"It's just around the corner. We have to do something to celebrate. What do you want for your birthday?"

Yuichi chuckled.

"Nothing, really. I'm not much into birthdays."

"But I want to do something."

It was the day the man he loved was born, and this was the first opportunity Imakura would have to celebrate it with him. He kept staring at Yuichi until he gave in and answered while caressing his cheek.

"On my birthday, I want you to think of me the entire day."

"It should be more than that..."

"That would make it the best birthday ever. One doesn't always get to monopolize another person's thoughts for the whole day."

Imakura's chest started to hurt, even though he was happy. He was short, timid, and didn't know much about anything besides wine, and yet this man loved him. He thought he might cry, and buried his head in

Yuichi's warm chest.

After a bath, they went to bed without having sex. Imakura gazed at his lover sleeping next to him and thought hard about what he could do for the man he loved so much.

The next day at 7:00 sharp, Yuichi arrived at Cherbourg with his boss. There were three men and five women in their party. Imakura watched out of the corner of his eye as Mr. Tani led them to their table in the back of the restaurant. He supposed there were more women because it was a cosmetics company, which made sense.

After they were seated and things had settled down, he approached the table. He was strangely nervous since the table included someone he knew, and his legs shook.

"Would you care for an aperitif?"

His eyes met those of his lover. He was slightly embarrassed by the gentle look he was given.

"Let's see..."

A woman with shoulder length black hair looked over the wine list. She looked somewhere around forty, somewhat older than everyone else at the table. She must be the boss. The woman ordered a Peacher Kir. Yuichi, and another man that seemed somewhat lower in rank, ordered glasses of champagne, while the older man and the rest of the women decided to share a bottle of salon.

The man who had ordered the salon was movie-star handsome. It wasn't just his face, either. There was something in the way he held himself. The



best way to describe him in one word might be 'sexy'.

He must have stood out, because even Miki commented that there was really good looking guy at the table that Imakura was serving.

Once they had decided on their meals, Imakura went to take their wine order. Perhaps because it was a large party, they ordered a bottle each of red and white.

The first tasting was carried out by the woman who appeared to be the boss. Imakura was about to quietly take his leave when she stopped him.

"Are you Higashiyama's friend?"

The question shocked him at first, but Yuichi gave him a reassuring smile.

"Yes."

The woman studied his face intently as if she were memorizing each detail.

"Could you come a little closer?"

Even though he was unsure what was going on, he did as she asked.

"A little closer. And lean in."

He bent over thinking she was going to show him something small when suddenly, warm, soft fingers touched his cheek.

"So soft..." she exclaimed.

"I just couldn't help but notice how beautiful your skin is. Not only is it white with no blemishes, it is soft. It's perfect!"

The other women exclaimed that they wanted to touch his skin as well. Imakura wasn't quite sure what to think as one by one their fingers touched his face.

"It's like a baby's bottom. I can't believe it."

They all expressed their amazement.

"We should use him in commercials instead of using models that need to be touched up."

The attention was a little uncomfortable. The older woman touched her own cheek and looked at him enviously.

"Age can be hard on skin. How old are you? Around 20?"

He blushed, and Yuichi jumped in.

"Ms. Takanaga, would you believe that Imakura is older than me?"

"Oh my...you're kidding. I'm sorry. So you're around 26 or 27?" She wasn't going to give up on this line of questioning.

"Actually, I'm 32."

The instant he said this, a cry went up around the table. He could hear them whispering to each other that there was no way this was true.

"He's about the same age as you, Fujiwara," one of the women said to the older, handsome man. He chuckled. He looked smart in his tailored suit, and must be accustomed to eating at better restaurants because he didn't seem overwhelmed by the menu. He even looked good when he brought the wine glass to his lips.

Imakura wondered how they could be so different. They were both humans, both the same age...

"Imakura, I'm sure you have other tables to attend to."

Yuichi's words helped him escape. With eight people at their table, the wine disappeared very quickly, and when he returned, the older woman apologized for

making a scene earlier. He didn't want her to feel bad, so he told her, "I have quite a young face and everyone thinks I'm younger than I really am. Please pay it no mind. Please enjoy your meal and the wine."

While he was busy waiting on other tables, they left. Mr. Tani said, "The woman in the group, the one who looked around 40, thanked you for the delicious wine. She also said something weird. "Be sure to take care of that beautiful skin. Does that mean something?"

Later, on his way home after work, he was surprised to see Yuichi waiting under the raised highway along his normal route. He had seen someone standing there, but it was dark, and he hadn't recognized him from a distance.

"What's up?"

He ran over, and Yuichi said he'd come to meet him.

"There was no reason to do that. You could have waited at home."

"I wanted to come."

He took Imakura's right hand and began to walk. Though Imakura was worried that others might see, he was also happy. His lover was still in the same suit he'd worn at the restaurant, and he was wearing a cream colored coat on top of that. He must not have gone home yet.

"Did it make you feel bad?" Yuichi asked as they walked along.

"What?"

The only thing on his mind had been Yuichi's warm hand and he didn't quite know what he was

talking about.

"When they were talking about your looks and touching you. I was worried it had made you feel bad."

He stopped naturally, as did Yuichi who turned to face Imakura.

"It was fine," Imakura said. "I've always had a young face, and I'm used to the comments."

His lover sighed in relief.

"You're such a worrywart."

The wind started to blow. It wasn't as cold as it can get in the winter, but it was still chilly. Imakura squeezed his lover's hand.

"Let's get home. It's cold."

"You're cold?"

"A little."

The second he said so, Yuichi quickly pulled him in and hugged him tightly. He looked around nervously, but it was late and night and the street was deserted. Still...

"Yu-chan...someone might come."

He didn't resist Yuichi's lips. There was the slight hint of liquor...not wine. They must have gone somewhere else for drinks.

"To tell you the truth, I was angry," Yuichi whispered in Imakura's ear. "I couldn't believe they would all touch you that way."

"It was just my face."

"I was still angry. Your face, your entire body, is mine alone."

His heart raced. Lifting his head, their eyes met. Yuichi did not look happy.

"I'm a very jealous person. It pissed me off that they would keep touching you when you were obviously uncomfortable. I never should have taken them to your restaurant."

Imakura felt a tinge in his chest when his lover confessed that he was jealous. He knew he was loved, not by his words, but by his warm embrace.

Forgetting that they were out in the open, he did his best to reach up. He kissed his jealous lover. Yuichi blinked in surprise.

"Let's get home," he said somewhat embarrassed as he looked down. Yuichi nodded his agreement.

"When we get there, we can continue this."

It wasn't until later when he noticed what he how bold these words had been. Yuichi rubbed up against his cheek like a dog and whispered in a low voice, "When we get home, will you let me touch you all over?"

Imakura did not lift his gaze when he answered, "Sure."

"Will you let me suck you?"

Just hearing these words made it feel like his crotch was being grasped and he felt weak-kneed.

"Uh...sure..."

"As I lick your dick, will you let me stick my fingers in and swirl them around?"

Imakura blushed bright red. Even though they did this type of thing every day, it seemed so raw to actually hear the actions voiced out loud.

"Uh...ok...but only when we get home."

Yuichi laughed. He placed his arm around Imakura's shoulders and they hurriedly walked along the path below the raised highway back to their love nest.

It was a bright morning, and a nice, warm day outside. Imakura lived close enough to work to walk, and could usually make it on time if he left at 3:30, but today he left before noon. He headed for the department store near the next station to look for a present for his lover's birthday, which was coming up in ten days.

Though he'd attempted once again to ask him what he wanted, the answer had been the same: he merely wanted Imakura to think about him the entire day.

But Imakura wanted to get him something that would be a reminder of the day. He thought it over, but nothing came to mind. Since he knew about wine, he considered a bottle of vintage wine, but Yuichi wasn't as big a fan as he was. If Imakura opened a bottle Yuichi would have some, but he was more likely to drink beer.

He went to the department store hoping he would find some inspiration. He walked through the men's fashion and accessories departments, but nothing caught his eye. Even though Yuichi had nice things, he didn't seem attached to any particular brand. He had checked the tags of his clothes and logos of his accessories, but there was no common link except for being subdued in style and functional.

Imakura browsed through the store for an hour, but found nothing to buy before he ran out of time. He had to get to work. As he passed through the cosmetics

department on the first floor, his eye was caught by the booth for Yuichi's company. They had recently experimented with selling vitamins along with their products and this had proved to be extremely popular. There were two women who looked like customers sitting at the booth having make-up applied by an employee. He also noticed a man standing off to the side. A man wouldn't be buying cosmetics for himself, so he must be purchasing a gift. But when Imakura looked closer, he recognized him. The man also noticed him, and bowed slightly.

"Hello, Mr. Imakura," he said brightly as he approached. Imakura bowed politely. When he was closer, Imakura was finally able to place him. He was one of the men in Yuichi's group at the restaurant the other night. There had been three men, including Yuichi, and while one of the other men had stood out because he was so handsome, the younger man sitting next to Yuichi hadn't made such a strong impression.

Standing next to him, Imakura noticed he was six feet tall. While he wasn't terribly handsome, he had a kind face, an impression that was helped by the fact that his eyes slanted slightly downward.

"My name is Kaitani. The wine you recommended the other night at the restaurant was really good. Mr. Higashiyama said it would be, and you did not disappoint."

Imakura was genuinely happy at his words.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"It opened my eyes to wine, and I went to my local liquor store to buy some. It was white. But this one

was bitter. Not at all like the one at the restaurant."

Kaitani rubbed the back of his head and chuckled.

"The wine from the other night was a white wine from the Mosel region of Germany and was sweet. I thought a sweet wine would be better because there were a large number of women in your group. The one you bought might have been a dryer type of white."

Kaitani seemed impressed.

"The next time you go to a store, look at the label and choose a German wine. Ones that say Auslese or Eiswein are sweet."

"Sommeliers really are different."

Imakura quickly disagreed.

"I'm not a sommelier, just a trainee."

"Really? But you know so much."

His envious gaze was getting uncomfortable. The information Imakura had given him was basic wine knowledge, something even a beginner would know.

"There was another man with you the other night...I think his name was Fujiwara. He seemed to know a lot about wine."

When he mentioned the handsome man's name, Kaitani's bright expression instantly soured.

"He likes to show off. Fujiwara's my boss, but I get along much better with Yuichi. He's good at his work, but he doesn't shove it in your face, and he's interesting. I eat lunch with him a lot. Speaking of lunch, it's a weekday. Do you have the day off?"

"No, I'm working tonight. I start at 4:00. Are you out on a sales run?"

Kaitani laughed.

"I'm here to check on the sales of our products... and to do some research on other companies."

"Oh."

He heard the strains of Kiyoko Suisenji's "365 Step March" and Kaitani hurriedly took out his cell phone. After answering "yes" several times, he said he would get back to the office immediately and hung up.

"It's not like I'm goofing off, but my boss is a hard ass. Of course, I guess you could say that I'm blowing off work while talking to you." There was a slight smile in his eyes.

Imakura liked the fact that Kaitani was able to see that about himself and thought he was an interesting man.

"Why don't you and Yuichi come out drinking with me sometime? You can teach me more about wine."

"I'd like that."

"See you later, then."

He smiled and turned. As he watched his tall back move away, Imakura suddenly remembered whey he was here. He hurriedly chased after him.

"Excuse me..."

Kaitani stopped in the middle of the street and turned around.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry to bring this up, but there is something I'd like to ask you." He had been running and was trying to catch his breath as he talked. "Would you happen to know what kinds of things Yuichi likes?

What's the first thing that comes to mind?"

"Something Yuichi likes?" Kaitani furrowed his brow and tilted his head. "Something Yuichi likes... hmm. Wait, I've got it! He loves the beef bowl at Hiyoshiya. He once said he would eat for every meal if he could."

Offering this important seed of information and a bright smile, Kaitani took his leave. Hiyoshiya was a national chain of beef bowl restaurants known for its slogan 'Cheap, Fast, and Delicious'. Even Imakura had eaten there before. If he remembered correctly, it only cost 340 yen to eat there...

"Hiyoshiya beef bowl..."

He may really like it, but it only cost 340 yen. Food might work as a gift if it was Matsuzaka beef, caviar, or foie gras, but that was a little too cheap.

Looking at his watch, he saw that it was already after 2:00. He was making his way back to the station when the bright red sign of Hiyoshiya jumped out at him from across the street. A number of banners proclaimed the 340 yen price for a beef bowl. Imakura stopped and stared at them for a moment.

When his shift ended and he exited the hotel, it was past midnight. Even though it was late at night, the road was full of cars. Just as promised, Yuichi was waiting by a tree planted next to the guardrail. He wore a light windbreaker over his shirt.

"Is that..."

Miki noticed Yuichi as well when she came out.

"You're Imakura's friend. I've seen you several times before in the restaurant."

"We're going out, so I can't walk with you to the station tonight."

Miki laughed and said that it was fine.

"It's a major street and well lit. If anything should happen, I'll show them what I've learned in my beginners judo class."

Imakura's eyes opened wide in surprise.

"You know judo?"

"Didn't you know?"

She smiled as she said goodnight and turned towards the station. Imakura knew she was strong, she could even lift wine crates that were too heavy for him, but he didn't know she had taken judo lessons. He had made it a point to accompany her to the station because it could be dangerous for a woman to walk alone, but now he saw that wasn't it necessary at all.

"Let's go."

Turning around, he saw a taxi waiting. He scurried over and got in back with his lover.

"Did you wait long?"

"Not really. About ten minutes."

He didn't sound angry, but he seemed to be in a foul mood. They could usually make small talk for hours at a time, but the air seemed heavy and Imakura sat silently with his head down. The taxi continued west.

"Where is your friend's place?"

"Seibo-machi."

He wasn't familiar with that area. Yuichi let out a heavy sigh. Hearing that, Imakura regretted

making such a big deal about going tonight.

It all started very innocently four days ago. Still trying to figure out what his lover might like for his birthday, Imakura decided the best thing to do would be to ask those who knew him.

"Who's your best friend?"

Yuichi was sitting on the couch with his legs crossed. After thinking about it for a second, he answered that it would be Tomoharu.

"What does Tomoharu do?"

Yuichi was strangely at a loss for words, but he finally answered. "He has his own place. It's a bar."

"Really? Is it close by?"

"Not that far. About two stations away."

This was his chance.

"I would like to meet Tomoharu."

Yuichi seemed flabbergasted at the request.

"What do you mean?"

"I'd like to talk some of your friends. Would you take me to his place?"

Though he was never at a loss for words, Yuichi clammed up.

"You said it was close-by. I'd like to go."

He grabbed his shoulder and shook him, but Yuichi still didn't answer. He didn't seem too pleased, but Imakura had to do his research.

"If you don't want to take me, I can go myself. Just tell me the name of the bar and where it is..."

But Yuichi yelled "no" in a loud voice. "There is no way I'm going to let you go to Tomoharu's place alone."

"Why?"

He didn't understand why Yuichi had raised his voice. Yuichi opened his mouth like he wanted to say something, but nothing came out. He gaped like a carp for a second and then closed his mouth. Then he gathered himself and tried a different direction.

"You can't go alone. No way. It is only open at night, and it isn't in the safest area."

Imakura pouted.

"I can go at night. I'm not a child, you know."

"That's not what I mean..."

"What do you mean then?"

Yuichi wasn't sure what to say anymore. He brought his hand to his forehead.

"You just can't go alone." He was dead set against it.

"Then take me. I'd like to go with you."

"Yeah, but..."

The conversation remained the same. Even though Yuichi was reluctant, Imakura didn't give up. Finally, after three days of light badgering, Yuichi relented...but only on the condition that Imakura wouldn't leave his side.

In about fifteen minutes, the taxi reached a narrow street that was lined with bars and restaurants. Yuichi got out of the cab, but he didn't move once he hit the street. Since he didn't move, Imakura didn't move either. They both stood silently on the side of the road.

"Are you really sure you want to go to his bar?" Yuichi asked. Imakura did want to go, but his lover's mood made him pause and he couldn't answer.

"We've come this far so I should tell you. Tomoharu is gay, and he runs a gay bar. The patrons are veterans of the dating scene, and some of them can be very tough."

"I just want to meet your friend. I don't care about everyone else."

His lover gritted his teeth as he started to move forward. Imakura hurried to keep up with him. Even when he grabbed the hem of his windbreaker and tugged on it, he didn't slow down.

A dozen yards later, Yuichi came to a dead stop. A simple sign with the name "Belzaud S" hung on the black door.

"Is this it?"

Yuichi grabbed his arm and retreated about ten feet.

"I'll take you in, but..." He trailed off and wouldn't look up as he spoke. "You have to promise not to leave my side. If someone other than Tomoharu should try to talk to you, ignore them. If anyone is looking at you, assume that they are trying to try to hit on you."

Imakura tilted his head quizzically, and then laughed.

"No way someone's going to try to hit on me. Besides, it's a gay bar. There's singing and dancing and weird shows, right?"

"There are bars like that, but Tomoharu's place is designed for drinking."

It was the first time Imakura had heard that there were various types of gay bars.

"There are men in there who have come for no other reason than to try to pick someone up."

"Got it. But I'm here with you."

Yuichi gave a surprised expression and twisted Imakura's nose, playfully but a little too forcefully nonetheless.

"Ow. What's that for?"

Yuichi was angry, but his lover laughed and took his hand. He still held it tight when they walked in. Though it looked small from outside, it was long and quite large inside, although dark. In addition to the bar, there were five tables. Its interior had the feel of America in the 60's with antique chairs and dark rugs on the wall.

"Oh my god. Is that you, Yuichi. How are you?" The man from behind the counter called out to him. He was well built and looked like he could be a pro wrestler, and impression was made stronger by the fact that he wore clothes that showed off his muscular body. But he also had a beard and a very feminine way of talking...Imakura was perplexed by this strange contrast. Yuichi lead him to the bar and they sat down.

"Hello. Nice to meet you."

He had a large smile and closed in when he talked, making Imakura pull back unconsciously.

"It's not like I'm going to bite you," he said with humor.

"I...I'm sorry."

He took the hot towel the man offered and wiped his hands. He had known that there were gay men, and, of course, he was one himself. But he had never

been to a place like this, and this was also the first time he had ever met someone who was so obviously gay.

"Look at the cute guy you've found. Now I understand why you haven't been around."

Yuichi's body twisted strangely at these words.

"He may be cute, but keep your paws off him or I'll kill you."

This didn't seem like something he would say to his best friend, but the man just replied, "Ooooh! I'm sooooo scared."

Imakura was still nervous at his first foray into this new world, but Yuichi introduced Tomoharu and said they were the same age.

"Why don't you introduce me to your cute friend?"

His lover looked straight ahead and didn't say a word, so Imakura introduced himself.

"I'm sorry about before. My name is Imakura. Yuichi is...a good friend of mine."

His lover turned and gave him the evil eye.

"You're my lover, aren't you?"

"Uh...yes, but...but we're in public."

"Don't worry. This is that kind of establishment."

"Um..."

He had been nervous at first, and now that Yuichi was angry with him, his mood sunk lower.

"Well then, what would you like to drink? I can make you just about any kind of cocktail."

Seeing the uncomfortable situation unfold

before him, Tomoharu interjected.

"Um...do you have wine?"

"Don't go there," Yuichi grumbled to his side.
"It's cheap shit. You won't like it."

"Watch your mouth!" His friend the bartender seemed genuinely insulted. Tomoharu put his hands on his hips and furrowed his brow. Turning to Imakura, though, he gave him a big wink.

"It really is cheap. If you would like wine, why don't I make you a wine cocktail?" How about a sangria?"

"Sounds good."

He let out a sigh, but felt something around his hips. It was his lover's hand. He was putting his hand around his waist as if to tell everyone that they were very much in love, even though his face showed his displeasure. Imakura did not understand him at all.

"Yu-chan. Your hand..." He whispered his words to try to calm him.

"What? Don't you like it?" Yuichi's voice still signaled that he was angry.

"No...I was just wondering if you really want to be doing that here?"

"What?"

"Aren't you embarrassed to do it in front of others?"

Yuichi's words were bitter cold. "It's not like I can put a sign on you saying that you're mine. I have to do something so the others get the picture."

Imakura turned back and noticed that all eyes were on him. He became nervous and began to slouch.

"Here you go."

The cocktail was very colorful. Along with Tomoharu, the three of them, even his moping lover, had a toast.

"Taka-chan, how old are you?"

Tomoharu was already being familiar with him. He smiled as he waited for the answer.

"You must be out of your teens. If not, you wouldn't be able to come in."

Though somewhat tired of being seen as younger than his true age, Imakura answered.

"I'm 32."

Tomoharu's eyes looked like they were going to pop out of their sockets.

"You're older than little ole me? You lie. Liar. You skin is much too beautiful to be that old. You must tell me how you look so good at your age."

He stuck out his thick finger and was just about to touch Imakura's face when an angry voice jumped in.

"Don't touch him!"

Tomoharu's shoulders shook in shock and he pulled his hand back.

"What? Don't be so possessive. If you don't like the idea of him being touched, you shouldn't have come here."

"I didn't want to. He did."

Tomoharu's face filled with glee.

"I know nothing about Yuichi from the days before I met him. I was sure you would know things about him..."

Tomoharu's mouth widened showing all his teeth.

"I do. All sorts of things..."

Yuichi leaned forward suddenly, thrusting his upper body over the bar.

"Don't say too much."

"But Taka-chan wants to know."

As they were talking, a voice called to Yuichi from behind. When he turned, he saw a young man in a dark suit. He was tall but thin, and looked very young for his age. He was friendly because his eyes met Imakura's and he smiled. But he spoke to Yuichi.

"Long time no see, Yu-chan. I was wondering what had happened to you since I haven't seen you around."

"Oh...yeah...good to see you."

Yuichi's eyes wandered in his nervousness. He kept looking between the man and Imakura.

"I have a lot to talk to you about. Can I have a seat?"

Yuichi tried to wave him off, raising his thumb towards Imakura.

"I don't care if your boyfriend is here. I've been doing my own thing as well."

His tone was soft, but he didn't give the impression that he was going to give up. Was he also a friend of Yuichi's? When Imakura said he didn't mind if the man joined them, Yuichi suddenly stood.

"Don't talk to anyone but Tomoharu. Got it?"

Saying this, he went with the man to the back of the bar. Watching them go, Tomoharu put his hand on

his hip and giggled.

"Don't feel so bad. Everyone has a past."

"A past?"

"Yes, a past."

Imakura didn't quite understand what he meant by 'past.' Had the two fought before? It didn't seem important enough to ask. Yuichi was in the back sitting across from the man. He didn't look like he would be back that soon. This was his chance.

"Tomoharu. You're friends with Yu-ch... Yuichi, right?"

"You call him Yu-chan? How cute."

Imakura blushed.

"It's me you're talking to. You can call him Yu-chan if you like."

He looked down at Imakura, and placed his cheek in his hand.

"So, what do you want to know? I'll tell you anything."

Rubbing his still hot cheeks, Imakura looked up.

"Do you know what sort of things Yu-chan likes?"

Tomoharu tilted his head slightly.

"Things he likes?"

"His birthday is coming up and I want to buy him a present, but he'll only say that he doesn't need anything. I was wondering if you know what sort of things he likes, or what he might want."

"How precious!" Tomoharu practically yelled as he clapped his hands in front of his face. His voice

was so loud that it drew the attention of others.

"You are such a find!"

"Um...Tomoharu...could you please keep your voice down?"

Tomoharu said he was sorry and stuck out his tongue.

"I am just so happy to be talking about something so simple just like back in my school days. All I ever hear is who slept with whom, or who got dumped and when. So, you want to know what Yuichi likes?"

Tomoharu nodded.

"He has more of a desire for the flesh than for possessions. He plays around, but not too much. His technique down there is good enough, and he has a serious side."

Imakura thought he'd misheard when the word 'flesh' came up...but was he supposed to take 'technique' at face value?

"That's it! There isn't really anything that he wants, but I know his type."

Imakura's heart raced.

"Type?"

Tomoharu wagged his finger at him.

"Yes. He really, really likes them young."

The word 'young' cut at him like a knife.

"Once when looking at students from Oran High School, he commented that he wanted a lover like that."

Without thinking, Imakura gulped down the rest his sangria. Tomoharu's eyes widened.

"Would you like another...no...I'll get you a gimlet."

Tomoharu called to his employee to bring a gimlet. Imakura was hanging his head in silence. The bar owner had to ask if something was wrong.

"Uh...no...nothing..."

"Did I say something wrong? He may like them young, but it's nothing more than a preference. Besides, you do look so young, dear."

Tomoharu tried his best to gloss over his words, but it was too late. His mood had already darkened. As he sat there silently, the gimlet arrived. He drank it, but it tasted different than he remembered.

"It's a bit dry..."

"We make it that way. We use fresh limes."

Imakura gulped down the drink in one breath. Tomoharu let out a sigh.

"Don't go overboard. Yuichi will get angry with me."

"I'll take a martini, please."

He pushed the empty glass forward.

"How about a mimosa? That uses champagne."

"Make it a gibson."

Tomoharu gave up and called for a gibson.

"It's strange for someone with a cute face like yours to drink so much. You should have something that isn't as strong."

He had been picking drinks heavy with alcohol for a reason. His fingers were already getting hot.

"I like wine better than hard alcohol."

"How refined. But you also seem to know about other drinks as well."

"I'm studying to become a sommelier. I work at a restaurant and can make cocktails if I have to."

Tomoharu listened with interest.

"I'm in this business, and I do have friends that are sommeliers, but it's still not your everyday job."

Imakura's face was getting hot, and he rubbed his cheeks.

"I used to work at the same pharmaceutical company as Yuichi. When it went bankrupt, I decided to learn about wine and become a sommelier."

The gibson arrived. Tomoharu urged him to take it slow, so he only took a sip. The dry liquor burned his throat. He felt a tide rush over his head. He was so sad that tears gushed out of both eyes.

"Hey, hey! Why are you crying?"

Tomoharu grabbed his right hand.

"I'm...so sorry..."

"Sorry for what?"

He brought his left hand to his eyes and then wiped his nose.

"I have to apologize to Yu-chan..."

"Apologize? Why? Did you cheat on him?"

Imakura shook his head and went on, "No, I haven't cheated. And I never will. I've led him astray."

Tomoharu tilted his head in confusion.

"I used to be very fat and had never slept with a woman. I got stranded on an island with Yu-chan, and one thing led to another... I'd only been attracted to women before, but ever since I fell in love with him, I



realized that I was really gay. But Yu-chan isn't..." Tomoharu gasped.

"He said that he'd only done it with women before me. I don't know what made it better, but he became so enamored of me that he turned gay. I can't believe I let this happen."

Tomoharu put his hand on his cheek and asked if Imakura really believed what he was saying.

"Have you asked Yuichi about this? That he became gay because of you? As far as I know, he's always been..."

Imakura pounded the bar with his right hand. It's the only way I can explain it. Yu-chan is so cool and such a nice person. He could have any woman he wanted. But he fell in love with me... I don't care if I'm gay, but I can't stand the fact that I've turned his world upside down. I'm so sorry."

Tears began to flow again. "I know this is all because of my ego. But I don't want to lose him..." He'd been scared to even say the word "lose" and tears continued to flow from his eyes.

"That's why...why I want to be my best for him. He sacrificed himself for me. I want to do what I can for him..."

When he remembered that Yuichi had a thing for younger partners, he couldn't hold back and actually sobbed. On top of everything else, he was making him settle for someone older. He was so glad that he at least looked young. If not for that, he would have nothing else to fall back on.

"Um...now that I know you love Yuichi so

much...I...uh...sorry for asking this but...was Yuichi your first male lover?"

Tomoharu asked in a low tone. He had just met Imakura, but he knew that he held no prejudices when it came to sex, and he was drunk. Tomoharu could not hold back.

"Yes. And I had never dated a woman before either..."

Tomoharu let out another loud yelp that could be heard throughout the bar. Yuichi flew to his lover's side.

"What did you say to Imakura?" Yuichi was enraged, but Tomoharu maintained his innocence.

"I haven't said a thing. I was listening to him. You should be ashamed of yourself, doing what you've been doing to someone so pure."

Yuichi looked like he was going to explode, and pulled Imakura to a table. The man he was with earlier was gone. Sitting him down, he grilled Imakura like a police interrogator about what he had said.

"This and that..."

"Why won't you tell me?"

Fresh tears started to flow. His heart hurt when his lover was angry with him. Still, Yuichi looked frantic as he shook his shoulders.

"Why are you crying? Because I got angry?"

"No. I was drinking strong drinks..."

The tears gushed. His lover wiped them and then tussled his hair. Imakura went over and sat on Yuichi's knees. While he had been embarrassed earlier by the hand on his waist, he didn't feel the slightest bit

embarrassed now. He had forgotten that they were other people around them.

"Yu-chan, I love you." He nuzzled his lover's neck with his nose.

"And I, you."

He was happy, but he still cried. He heard an exasperated sigh.

"Did Tomoharu ask you something you didn't like?"

"No, but..."

He should have never asked. His lover liked younger partners. If he liked thin people, he could lose weight. If he liked fat, he could gain weight. He might even be able to change his personality. With money, he could even change his face. But age was something he could do nothing about. Even if he prayed over and over, he would never be younger than Yuichi.

He kissed the man he loved and clung tight. Saying 'I love you' made him sad...but even in his sadness, he buried his face in Yuichi to breathe in the familiar scent he had come to love and fell asleep.

It was almost noon when he woke up. He saw the familiar sights of their bedroom. He only had a vague recollection of what happened once they got out of the chair, but he seemed to remember Yuichi carrying him to a taxi.

Drifting in and out, he seemed to hear Tomoharu say "It's fine to fall deep in love, but don't let it go to your head. You can't blame me for everything."

"Imakura!"

The voice from behind caught him by surprise.

He dropped the glass he was cleaning, and it crashed to the floor with a loud noise.

"Oh. I'm sorry I startled you."

Miki's face showed the words were sincere. Imakura chuckled that it was OK.

"I'm out of it today."

"I'll clean it up before Mr. Tani sees it."

Imakura stood in a daze as he watched her pick up the broken shards.

"Are you done with the cellar check?"

When he asked, Miki seemed a little perturbed.

"Yes. I gave you the inventory list, didn't I?"

"Did you...?"

"Get a grip! What's wrong?"

She didn't have to say anything. He was very aware that he was having problems concentrating. It all started the night they went to Tomoharu's bar. Miki put her hands on her hips and tilted her head.

"You've been down for the past couple of days. You won't smile, and you seem very out of it. Even Mr. Tani said something to me. He thinks you're worried about something."

That was, of course, the case, but he could only hang his head. Miki looked around and then, taking Imakura's hand, led him through the employee's corridor to the office. There was no one inside.

"If something is bothering you, why don't you tell me?"

She forced Imakura to sit on a small folding chair. He slowly looked up at her.

"Instead of keeping it all inside, it'll help if you talk about it. If you can't do a good job, it affects me, too. I'm not as good as you in ordering wine."

He looked down and cupped his face in his hands.

"I'm sorry to inconvenience you."

"It's not an inconvenience, but I worry when I see you in such a bad mood. Is there something wrong between you and Yu-chan?"

Women's intuition never failed to amaze him. He nodded yes. He had told Miki that he had a lover named Yu-chan that was five years younger than him, but he had not revealed that he was a man.

"Did you have a fight?"

"No..."

Miki crossed her arms and nodded.

"Did Yu-chan cheat on you?"

"No."

"Did you propose but not get the answer you expected?"

"No," Imakura chuckled.

"It may not be a big deal, but I have had to deal with it on my own."

Miki moved in closer.

"You'll feel a lot better if you talk about it."

He couldn't decide what to do. It had been extremely difficult keeping it all bottled up inside.

"I met a good friend of Yu-chan's. That friend said that Yu-chan liked people younger than him. I'm five years older..."

Miki couldn't believe it was such a small



matter and even said so before thinking better of it.

"It's a huge deal to me."

Miki shook her head, aghast at what she was hearing.

"Everyone has an ideal type, but reality is often very different. You don't have to worry. Just look at me. I think actors in foreign films are handsome and have even joined fan clubs, but my boyfriend is completely different from them. Is your girlfriend the type of person who would break up with you just because you weren't her type? I don't think so."

Miki was right. She was right, but Imakura still could not shake off his fear.

"I have no confidence in myself. That's why every little thing scares me. I really love Yu-chan, but I don't know if the feeling is mutual."

"What do you mean? You're a great guy."

Miki took both of his hands, and squeezed them as if to give him strength.

"Your heart is pure. You have a cute face, but that isn't as important. It's your feelings, your heart that is most important. You should have more confidence in yourself."

It was like a ray of light had finally cut through the darkness. Her words had helped him crawl out of the depths. More than age or gender, it was the heart that mattered most.

"You're right. Feelings are most important."

"You bet they are."

He held Miki's hands and squeezed hard. He felt their friendship had crossed the divide that often

exists between the sexes.

"Speaking of Yu-chan, have you decided on her birthday present? It's coming up soon, isn't it?"

Imakura gasped. He had been so traumatized by the "younger partner" news that he had completely forgotten about Yuichi's birthday. That is why he had gone to Tomoharu's bar in the first place: to do research. But then he had heard information that he wished had never come up...

"I'd forgotten all about it."

"Even though you were putting so much effort into it? Didn't you say you were going to ask people who knew her?"

"I did, but..."

Imakura hung his head in silence. Miki swung his hand back and forth.

"Yu-chan..."

He was having a hard time getting the words out.

"What? Just say it."

"Yu-chan seems to have a thing for uniforms."

"Like a stewardess or nurse?"

Imakura shook his head in frustration.

"No. Those from Oran High School."

Miki let out a sigh. Not only did Yu-chan like younger men, she was into school uniforms. It was weird, but...she clapped her hands.

"That's it. I have a friend who went to Oran High. You could wear their uniform for some costume play."

"Costume play?"

"Yes. On your lover's birthday, you can wear the uniform as a present. It's sure to be a big hit."

Miki stood up.

"When you're in love, it can be fun to play around like that. Give me a sec. I'll give them a call."

Miki was just about to leave the office when he grabbed her arm.

"Miki, wait. Actually..."

Imakura used a good chunk of his salary to reserve a room at the Jackson Hotel for his lover's birthday. He was not able to get a suite, but he did manage to reserve a luxurious room with a beautiful view. He text messaged Yuichi, "After work, please come to room 2821 at the Jackson Hotel. There will be a key waiting at the front desk. Please text me about 30 minutes before you arrive." Yuichi mailed back shortly after that he had received the message. So far, so good.

When the '30 minutes before' text message arrived, Imakura rushed out of the hotel. When he returned 15 minutes later, he changed and hid in the closet.

Exactly thirty minutes after the message, the intercom rang and Imakura heard his name being called. He did nothing, and shortly after there was the sound of the door opening. He could hear footsteps inside.

"Beef bowl from Hiyoshiya...?"

It seemed as if he had found the piping hot bowl of rice and meat on the table.

He read the prepared note next to the bowl out loud.

"Please text me when you have finished eating...what is he up to?"

Imakura could see his slightly confused face in his mind's eye. Ten minutes later, his cell phone began to vibrate. He looked at the message: "I've finished the beef bowl. Where are you?" Imakura answered with a message he had already prepared.

He heard Yuichi's cell phone ring. He waited three minutes and quietly opened the closet door. Just as he had instructed in the message, Yuichi was standing looking out the window. He must not have gone home first because he was wearing the same clothes as this morning. If he followed instructions, he would not turn his back until Imakura told him to.

He was not used to walking in loafers. He approached cautiously from behind, careful not to make a noise.

"Yu-chan..."

His lover jumped with shock but quickly regained composure and he didn't look.

"Can I turn around?"

"Yes."

Yuichi turned slowly, and when he saw Imakura, his jaw dropped.

"Happy 27th birthday!"

His shocked expression didn't change, and he looked Imakura up and down from head to toe several times. The first thing he said was "What the hell are you doing?"

"What..."

Imakura had overcome his embarrassment to

wear the uniform from Oran High School for his lover. He thought he would be happy, but he felt like crying when he saw Yuichi's cool reaction. To make it worse, Yuichi whispered, "Do you have a fetish for women's clothes?" Imakura's hands curled into fists and he began shaking.

"How could you think that? I'm wearing this because you said you like the uniforms from Oran High School."

The pleats from his checkered skirt flapped as he took a confrontational step forward. Yuichi's eyes narrowed, but then he finally understood.

"I remember saying a long time ago that I like the uniforms from that school, but it was the blazers that the boys wore, not the girl's uniform you have on."

Imakura blushed from the tip of his head to the nails on his toes. He had wanted to give his lover the thing he loved the most while wearing the clothes he liked the best. He didn't want to just come out in the beginning; he wanted it to be a surprise. That is why he'd come up with such an elaborate plan.

Though he was embarrassed borrowing a girl's uniform, Miki had said if dressing up as a woman would turn Yu-chan on, then fine, there were plenty of different types of people in the world, so she got it for him.

He didn't like how open the uniform was, especially down below. To make it more real, he had bought blue leg warmers and black loafers. But the result wasn't as he had hoped. His lover wasn't even the slightest bit happy. Tears began to well up in his eyes.

He brought his hand to the tie that was the

same pattern as the skirt and was going to rip it off, but his hands were shaking too much. When he finally threw the tie to the ground, he brought his hand back up to do the same to the blouse, but Yuichi stopped him.

"You'll rip it."

"I don't want to wear it anymore."

Yuichi held his arms so he could not move. In frustration, he stomped his feet.

"Settle down..."

His arms were released, but then Yuichi began to hug him. His breath in his ear tickled, and he instinctively relaxed. Yuichi picked him up and placed him down on the edge of the bay window. He had kindness in his eyes, and caressed Imakura's cheek.

"And just who told you that I like Oran High uniforms?"

Not lifting his head, Imakura answered that it was Tomoharu.

Playfully cursing his friend under his breath, Yuichi bent down to pick up the tie and then carefully retied it around Imakura's neck.

"Did you buy this uniform?"

He listlessly shook his head no.

"I borrowed it from someone at work."

Yuichi bent down on his knees in front of Imakura and put his arms on his thighs. He looked up at him from below.

"If it's a girl's uniform, you must have specifically asked for it."

"Yes..."

Yuichi laughed even as he called Imakura silly.

"Now that we know about the origins of the uniform, who told you about the beef bowl?"

"Kaitani," Imakura replied even though he was unhappy at having to give everything away.

"When did you talk to him? It wasn't during the dinner."

"I ran in to him at the department store. I asked him if he knew what you like, and he said beef bowls. Would you really eat one at every meal if you could?"

Yuichi brought his hands to his cheeks in surprise. Seeing this, Imakura was worried that perhaps he had misunderstood.

"Was I wrong about that, too? Do you like Mitakaya more than Hiyoshiya?"

"No, Hiyoshiya is right. I was just wondering how cheap everyone must think I am if they heard me say I would eat it all the time."

"Hiyoshiya is pretty good. I like it myself."

Yuichi blinked at Imakura. He laughed and placed his head on his knees. Neither said a word. They just sat there in silence.

"What's wrong, Yu-chan?"

"I'm just very happy. I'm basking in the warmth of happiness. Can you tell?"

"Because I'm wearing the girl's uniform?"

Yuichi lifted his head and reassured Imakura.

"I'm happy because you did everything you could to make me that way. That is the best present ever."

Imakura had been embarrassed and sad enough that he'd wished he could disappear, but that all

went away with these magical words. He couldn't hold back the flooding emotions, and caressed the head on his knees.

"The girl's uniform looks pretty cute, too... when you wear it."

"You're just saying that."

"No, I'm not. It's cute. You may not want to hear it, but I think you look good in it."

Yuichi stood, and Imakura kissed him with his back to the lights of the city. His calculations may have been off, but at least the desired effect was achieved; Yuichi was happy.

Yuichi whispered in his ear, "Can we do it while you wear the uniform?" Imakura felt a shiver down his spine.

"You can do whatever you like. It's your birthday."

Their eyes met, and Imakura looked away shyly.

"Really? Even if I get really freaky?"

Imakura laughed. "How would that be any different than normal?"

His lover replied whispering, "Just remember. You said it was okay." He pulled Imakura down from the window and putting his hand on the hem of the skirt, he pulled it up. Imakura instinctively pushed it back down.

"You're wearing underwear."

"Of course I am."

"I thought you might be wearing shorts or something. For your first task, I want you to pull up the skirt and show me your underwear."

"Huh...?"

"You said I could get freaky."

He had promised. But this was the first time he had worn a skirt, and definitely the first time he was asked to pull one up. If that was what the birthday boy wanted, though, he would give it to him. Yuichi's gaze did not move from the lower half of his body.

"There's a stain on your underwear."

His ears turned red and started burning.

"You get excited just by being looked at. Are you even more embarrassed than usual because you're in a skirt?"

Imakura gritted his teeth and nodded.

"Okay. Pull your underwear down. Down to your thighs. But keep the skirt up."

He was extremely clumsy, even before he became aware of Yuichi's gaze. He finally got the underwear down to his thighs.

Yuichi kneeled down in front of Yuichi and just stared at his penis without touching it.

"It's gradually stiffening. The tip is moist and quivering. It looks like you'll get hard without me even laying a finger on it."

He gently blew on the tip, and Imakura let out a shout. His bottom began to tingle. Imakura knew what was coming next. He knew how good it felt to have the tip rubbed, to have it sucked hard.

And he was waiting for it to happen now, but Yuichi did nothing. He couldn't tell him to do it. He had promised that Yuichi could do whatever he wanted today. He couldn't let his own desires get in the way.

He saw Yuichi's finger move towards his lower half. His body felt joy in the promise of an upcoming caress, but Yuichi did not touch his penis or balls.

Every time his finger touched something, Imakura heard a rough rustling sound. Yuichi was rubbing his light brown pubic hair, but avoiding all the other important areas. His hips shook with unbearable anticipation. He almost felt like doing the job himself if need be.

"Would you mind if I shaved down here?"

Yuichi twisted his finger in Imakura's pubic hair.

"Shave it?"

"I want to shave your pubic hair. I want to see how cute it is when it's smooth."

He would look like a child without pubic hair. Imakura shook his head. "No...no way."

Yuichi looked up at him as if to beg.

"It's my birthday. I can get freaky if I want. I want to see what you looked like when you were younger."

He understood the desire, but he was still resistant to the shaving. It might not hurt, and no one else would see it, but it was still...embarrassing.

"I'll be the only one who sees it. Let me make it smooth..."

Imakura finally relented to Yuichi's soft but insistent attack. He was lead to the low table in front of the sofa and lay down on top.

"This may be hard on your back, but it won't take long."

Yuichi took off his underwear, and grabbing his knees, pulled his legs apart.

"Can you open them further? It will make it easier."

After opening his legs as far as they would go, Yuichi began to shave using soap and a razor provided by the hotel. It was scary at first and his body shook, but he calmed down as Yuichi softly whispered that everything was okay.

The sound of the razor moving over flesh rasped in his ears. He wanted to cover his ears, but his hands were busy holding his knees up. He gradually became accustomed to the sound, and every time Yuichi's fingers brushed up against his penis and balls, he felt shockwaves travel through his body.

"Imakura..."

He opened his eyes to see his lover smiling.

"Does it feel that good? It's hard to shave if you are going to keep leaking like that."

He hadn't noticed anything come out, and felt like he was going to cry.

"I...I'm so sorry..."

"Hold on just a little longer...wait a sec."

His lover disappeared into the bathroom.

"They had the perfect thing, I'll put this on."

The hotel had provided a free hair tie. Yuichi placed it at the base of his erect penis. Imakura had never felt anything as good and let out a loud moan.

"Just a little bit more..."

With no outlet for the pleasure, his body began to shake. He could hold it in no longer. He bit his lip,

and tears welled up in his eyes as he endured. Finally, the sound of the razor stopped and he could feel a towel being wiped over his crotch.

"Are you done?"

"I'm done."

Putting down the towel, Yuichi laughed with glee.

"It looks really cute when it's smooth. Take a look for yourself."

"No way."

When he closed his legs and jumped off the table, he was grabbed from behind and hugged.

"You should believe me when I say it looks good. Come take a look."

Yuichi grabbed his arm and dragged him to the bathroom, despite the fact that he was still erect and it was hard to walk. Finding himself standing in front of the large mirror in front of the sink, all of a sudden he was grabbed at the knees and lifted. His lower half was sticking out like a child peeing.

"No...no..."

He sobbed as he made Yuichi put him down.

"Be good and don't resist. It really looks cute."

As Yuichi whispered over and over in his ear how good it looked, he fearfully opened his eyes. In the mirror he saw his now smooth crotch and erect penis. Rather than cute, it just looked strange.

"It's weird."

This time it really seemed like he would cry.

"What's so weird about it? It's cute."

Sitting Imakura down on the edge of the sink, Yuichi moved his fingers along the area he had just shaved. Imakura could see it all in the mirror. Whereas it had felt like scraping before, now the feeling was smooth, and his spine shook at how sensitive the area had become.

"Ah...nnn..."

Yuichi was especially gentle when caressing his penis and balls. Though it was almost too soft, the fact that there was no hair to get in the way made him much more sensitive.

Imakura was taken aback when Yuichi whispered, "You're so freaky, making your privates so smooth..."

"You're the one who did it."

"But you're the one who said I could. You must have wanted me to shave you so you looked like a child and then touch you like this."

He shook his head back and forth.

"I never...nnn..."

He could no longer resist when Yuichi bit his ear. When he squeezed Imakura's penis and balls, he couldn't stop moaning.

"Yu...Yu-chan..."

His lover whispered "What?" in his ear.

"Take...take off the hair tie."

"You mean...this?"

He thought Yuichi was taking it off, but he just snapped it.

"Oh my..."

His hips shook when the tie snapped back on

his throbbing penis. Before the shaking stopped, Yuichi's long fingers pushed their way back to the area that had been ignored up until now and made their way in. For a second, he stopped breathing. After the shock subsided, he opened his eyes. Not only could he see himself in the uniform with his legs spread wide before the mirror, he could also see the fingers where they entered him, something he had never seen before. He fidgeted.

"No...no..."

When he tried to turn, Yuichi scolded him, ordering him to look.

"I want you to see how it looks when I love you."

Even when he averted his eyes, he could hear the sound of Yuichi's fingers moving around.

"I'll let you come once you look at what I'm doing to you."

He wanted to say no, but the sensation was too much to handle. He opened his eyes, and without missing a beat with his fingers inside Imakura, Yuichi deftly removed the hair tie.

"You're beautiful...I love you..."

The second he heard these words, his penis began to throb and his body shook. Milky white semen shot onto the mirror and streaked down it.

Yuichi picked him off the sink and carried him to the bed. After roughly throwing him on the king sized bed, he dove in too. They embraced and kissed long and hard.

"I can't hold it any longer either," Yuichi whispered in Imakura's ear.

"You got to come first. Now it's your turn to make me feel good."

Imakura was about to take off his clothes when Yuichi told him to leave them on in a strained voice. Imakura lowered the zipper on his lover's slacks and lifted his hips and skirt over Yuichi's erect penis. He then lowered his hips. The pressure was intense, but it didn't hurt since Yuichi had already worked the area and relaxed it.

He moved his hips up and down, left and right as usual, but no matter how much he moved Yuichi didn't reach his sweet spot. When he became a little too desperate, Yuichi grabbed his hips.

"Do you like it?"

Shivers ran down his spine.

"Do you like it enough to shake your hips wildly?"

His whole body blushed. Yuichi laughed that he felt him tense inside.

"It's different than normal..."

"It's the same. The size and length are the same."

"It can't be...it doesn't reach..."

His lover opened his eyes wide.

"What do you mean it doesn't reach?"

He couldn't bring himself to say it and his lips quivered. His lover continued with his questioning, but it only made his sense of shame worse.

"There..."

"Where?"

"The place that feels good when rubbed."



The instant he said it, Yuichi grabbed both of his breasts through the uniform. His hips again began to shake.

"Not there..."

"But that does feel good, doesn't it? You like it when your nipples are rubbed, too."

No longer able to hold it in, he blurted out "The place where your cock is."

"Cock? You bad boy," his lover laughed.

"You told me to say it."

"It's fine with me. I like it when you're freaky."

They quickly changed positions. Yuichi grabbed his hips and thrusted hard, making Imakura moan loudly. He pulled back and then thrust again. As this continued, Imakura's hips became numb and he was aware only of the pounding. Even so, other parts of his body became strangely sensitive, and he moaned at the slightest touch.

The heat in Yuichi's crotch started to scare him. It felt good, but it was scary. It felt so good, he thought he might die. He lifted both arms to the heavens as if accepting his fate.

"Yu-chan... Yu-chan..."

The angle became deeper and Yuichi hugged him tight. He reached his hand around to Imakura's sweaty back and held him like he would never let go.

"Yu-chan... I love you." Imakura said and the words flowed naturally from his lips. "I love you... so much..."

He was kissed until he could no longer breathe,

and as the rocking continued, he fell into a chasm of orgasmic joy and lost consciousness.

When he woke up, it was past noon. His eyes opened when he felt his hair being caressed and saw Yuichi hovering so close that he wouldn't have to move to kiss him.

He thought he was about to get kissed himself, and it happened. It was the softest of kisses, and it felt so good that he hoped it would never end. His body was sore, especially in the area around his crotch, and his bottom stung, but...

When the kiss was over, Yuichi crawled under the sheets and began to suck on Imakura's penis. He remembered being shaved, but he had to look under the sheets to confirm that it was actually true. It was nothing to get uptight about. It would grow back...but he still wondered how long it would take.

Yuichi took his entire penis and balls into his mouth and sucked hard. Even though he thought he was entirely spent from the night before, it still made him wobbly, but it was still a lighter sensation, like a baby kitten sucking on its mother.

"Yu-chan..."

His lover lifted his head.

"Do you really like my penis that much?"

"If I didn't, would I be doing this?"

He smiled.

"But I love you most of all."

Yuichi crawled back up and put his head on Imakura's chest.

"I just love your aura when you say you love me."

Yuichi's words made Imakura happier than he could express. He was so happy, that his lips stretched into a wide grin.

"What are you smiling about?"

"I was thinking about how much you love me."

He seemed proud that he had won this round, and Yuichi let him have the moment. In his joy, Imakura tightly embraced the source of his happiness.

It wasn't until a little bit later that Imakura would find out that the man he loved so much had been gay since birth and it was Imakura who had been the puppet in him game...

THE END

**The Man Who Doesn't
Take Off His Clothes**

Vol.1

*From the
Don't Worry Mama Series*

Fall 2006

Afterword

I would like to thank those of you who often read my work, and those who are reading my work for the first time, for buying this book. It is a rather strange story, but I hope you enjoyed it.

The title story first appeared in a magazine some years ago. I don't remember how I came up with the idea, but I do remember having fun writing it. It was finished much quicker than anything else I have written. When the opportunity came to make it into a book, I reread it for the first time in a while, and I found that I had forgotten many of the details. I did play with them a little, but the basic story did not change.

With "Present"...I just wanted to show our characters very much in love with each other. I think I went a little bit overboard, though, and I had to make a lot of cuts to make the story come together. My editor said that I used the word XXXXX and that I should cut it as much as possible. It all seemed very natural to me, but it must have been strange to someone taking a more objective look at the work. The personalities of the characters can be limiting when you write, but Yuichi is the type of man who will do anything, and that made this piece much easier.

The illustrations were done by Yuki Shimizu. Her illustrations are so good that it is very difficult to alter on her work, but quite honestly, I wanted to see

the character's "things". The rough sketches of the full portraits of the characters were a great laugh at first, but I treasure them over everything else. Thank you very much.

I would also like to thank my editor. Thank you for suggesting that we make a book out of the story. I really didn't think it would happen. When I was writing the story for the magazine, I was constantly worrying about how deep of a character to make Imakura. It was fun playing with his character in the book.

Thank you to my friend who lives at the foot of the mountain. Not only did you give Imakura the nickname of "Imazo," your questions when reading the magazine story gave me fresh insight into the work. I hope you will enjoy the new story as well.

Thank you to those who read my works. Some of you wrote asking if the story would be made into a book. It took a number of years, but it finally happened. Though the new story is only a trifle, I hope you will enjoy it.

Until next time...

February
Narise Konohara



COLD SLEEP

PREVIEW

Coming Summer 2006 from



"If someone took a vacuum cleaner to every nook and cranny in my head," thought Tohru Takahisa, "I wonder if it would feel like this. Who am I...what am I? No matter how much I think about it, nothing comes up. It's like the inside of my head is a piece of art board before someone draws on it, all blank white."

The area was empty. It was a living room, but it had the desolate air of a freight warehouse thanks to the cardboard boxes that were simply piled up in the corners, as if substantiating the words of a man who said he'd just moved in.

He could see the dark night through the curtainless windows. The A/C started up with a faint activation hum. The cold breeze, not yet warmed up,

*Don't Worry
Mama*

blew against his cheek, and his back automatically flinched. The man put the bags containing Tohru's things by the wall, then disappeared into the forward-facing kitchen. On the carpet, unable even to remove his coat, Tohru vacantly pursued the man's retreating form. The man was silent as usual. Before coming here, they'd had dinner at a family restaurant, but even then, an oppressive silence had hung in the air as if they were at a wake. Since there had been noise all around them, he'd found their silence to be most worrisome. However, perhaps he was the only one who'd minded; as usual, the man's face was expressionless, so Tohru couldn't tell what he was thinking. He'd regarded various people as talkative or not, but even compared to people he'd generally considered "silent," this man spoke extremely few words.

He'd left the hospital about two hours ago. Things had run late in matching up with when the man's work was over. At first he'd waited for the man in his hospital room, but late in the afternoon, he'd retired to the waiting room. He'd watched the TV to kill time, but the familiar face of the nurse had popped into the entrance and said, "Oh, Mr. Takahisa. I wondered if you'd already checked out and gone home."

"My ride won't be here until after seven. It seems there were more patients, so I was chased out of my room," he responded with a painful smile.

As it passed 6 p.m., he caught the delicious aromas of the dinners being distributed in the hospital, and his stomach growled. As he wondered nervously if the man was going to show up soon, the nurse—now out

of uniform, perhaps on her way home for the night—poked her head in again, said, "Here, don't tell anyone," and slipped him some tea-cake pastries.

"It'll be lonely here when you check out, Mr. Takahisa. Old Mr. Ikegami's all depressed. He thinks of you as a grandson."

The elderly Mr. Ikegami, who'd been hospitalized for a dislocated hip, was a cynical chatterbox, secretly known among the nurses as "the geezer." Having been unlucky enough to get the bed opposite him, Tohru had been a captive audience, forced to hear tales of the "Tumultuous Showa Years." Thanks to this, he could now recite the names of the old man's air force unit, of course, and even the names of his second son's grandchildren.

"But when I was leaving the room, he told me, 'Now I'll get some better ventilation in here.'"

Tohru was over five foot ten, and every time he'd passed in front of Mr. Ikegami, he'd gotten various complaints: "Quit blocking my sunlight," or "Now it's gloomy in here." The nurse would waggle her right index finger back and forth and tsk-tsk him.

"Yes, he did say spiteful things, but he likes you, Mr. Takahisa. People have asked to change rooms because they were fed up with having to listen to old Mr. Ikegami's stories, but you heard him out."

In fact, he simply hadn't been able to wrangle a room exchange very well.

The nurse grinned and gave Tohru a solid pat on the shoulder.

"The tough part may be ahead, but you're a

good boy, so I think you'll be all right. Hang in there, young man."

He thought she was giving him too much credit, but appreciated her encouraging words. However, the anxiety that enveloped the inside of his heart like a thin film would not disappear. If he were released from the hospital, then there went the indulgences that came with being a patient. Even if his head never came back to normal, he would have to return to society. Even if he knew nothing, could do nothing.

The blare of a car horn brought him back to himself. While he'd been lost in reverie, the room had warmed up nicely. From the kitchen opposite him, he could hear the hissing bubble of hot water boiling.

He peered out through the window, wondering if he could find the source of the car horn, but it was too dark to see a thing. Reflected in the dark window glass on which the night was projected was the face of a young man he didn't know. Three months had gone by already, and he still couldn't get used to that face, the face of a twenty-two-year-old man named Tohru Takahisa. His own face. Yet in looking at it, he felt a cold distance, as if sneaking a peek at someone's photograph.

The creak of the wooden flooring made him turn his head to look back. The man was approaching with two mugs in his hands. The fragrant aroma of coffee drifted all through the dreary room. "Here," said the man, holding out one of the mugs.

"Thank you..."

It was mild and delicious, so unlike the vending machine coffee in the hospital. The man drew near the

window and looked down on the pitch-black scenery outside, occasionally bringing his mug of coffee to his lips.

His name was Keishi Fujishima. He was twenty-eight years old and stood a good four inches shorter than Tohru. He was slender all over and had a small face with small features. Those features were regular but undistinguished because they were expressionless, offering no clue as to what he was thinking. His hair was always perfectly combed, his shirt spotless. Coupled with his expressionless face, these gave an impression of someone cold and a little high-strung. However, one didn't get this feeling at all from the man's words and consideration for those around him. To be frank, he was unsociable, but one could readily believe that this didn't come out of coldness.

As Keishi stopped looking outside, his eyes met with Tohru's. Tohru quickly averted his gaze.

"I've prepared in your room what you'll need when making a living. Please don't hesitate to let me know if anything's missing."

"Um...thanks for everything, really."

In front of the grateful Tohru, Fujishima drank his coffee expressionlessly. "I'd feel easier if he'd say something like, 'Don't worry about it,' or 'I'm counting on you to return the favor,'" thought Tohru. As it was, he felt like his words were floating somewhere in the air, lonely. He often got that feeling when talking to the man.

His memories with Fujishima had begun about

three months ago, yet he still felt some reservations about the man. Fujishima himself gave a sense of looking at himself from all around at a distance. Tohru was unable to recall any past scenes of having casual small talk with him. He knew they were junior and senior, but when Tohru could not understand the meaning of the blank whiteness in his head, Fujishima had told him, "You and I are friends."

"You look tired. You should get some rest."

He'd done nothing in particular all day today. He didn't think he was tired, but it suddenly occurred to him that resting meant he could be alone, and he suddenly wanted out of this uncomfortable place.

"Okay, I'll be off to bed, then."

He gave a casual, light nod of his head, and Fujishima bowed his own head slightly in return. Before going to his room, he made to tidy up by taking the empty mugs into the kitchen. He didn't know how to use the faucet in the sink, so he washed off the mugs with cold water instead of hot. He thought his fingertips would freeze.

Slinging his luggage bag over his arm, he walked to the door he'd been told was to his room when he was first guided around the place, rubbing his hands together as he went. As he set foot into his room, he found it filled with a soft warmth like the beginning of spring. As Tohru kept standing vacantly in the dreary, six-mat room, which contained only a bed, he could hear the hum of the A/C working.

"Who am I?" he began asking himself. But the

answer wasn't being kept in any of the drawers of his mind.

Three months ago, around the middle of August, there had been an accident. It had been a car accident, apparently. Since he could not remember anything, the stories he heard from others became vague expressions. He remembered waking up in the Intensive Care Unit, surrounded by numerous machines, and everything since then, but nothing before.

When he'd first opened his eyes after the accident, the nurse had asked for his name. He knew he was being asked for "your name," but the crucial "name" had not come forth, and he had been unable to reply. The same held true for his age, his address, his job, and the names of his family. The inside of his head was blank, as if wiped over by an eraser.

He had been confused too, but the atmosphere around him had conveyed an even stronger bewilderment from the nurses and doctors. After a short while, a lone man had entered his hospital room. Tohru hadn't recognized his face. The man had looked down at him with a fixed expression, then turned to the doctor and declared, "There's no mistake. This man is Tohru Takahisa." Tohru Takahisa...Tohru Takahisa...even after hearing his own name, nothing had come to him. It was as if the name belonged to someone else.

He had cranial abrasions and damage to his right lung. His ribs and collarbone were fractured and his right arm dislocated. On top of all this, the cranial bruising had resulted in his amnesia. That was all the diagnosis that stuck with him. The wounds and broken bones he

could see had almost completely healed in those three months, but his memories alone remained at the site of the accident where he'd lost them. Despite all the time that had passed, they had not returned.

He was frightened of his blank memory. Where had he been born? What sort of parents had raised him? What kind of friends had he had? What had his school life been like? What had he been doing, and what had he been planning to do...? He saw no path for himself, either before or behind, and it terrified him. His anxiety had grown, and he'd begun to take it out on others. "It hurts not knowing anything!"

Then the young doctor who'd first brought him to the emergency hospital spoke to him, his eyes blinking slowly behind his glasses: "Judging from past cases of memory loss, there is no clear, definitive evidence of when your past memories will return. To put it in extreme terms, it could be tomorrow, or it could be twenty years from now. But instead of worrying about the past, why don't you think about the future? You're still young, Mr. Takahisa..."

"Go to hell," he'd thought. "Easy for you to say—you haven't lost your memory. I don't know what I like or hate, what my interests are...so how am I supposed to imagine a vision of my future? It's not like anything ever comes out of a null state..." That's what he'd wanted to say, but instead he'd just hung his head and bit his lip.

He hadn't stayed even a week at the first hospital to which he'd been brought. Fujishima had decided to get him transferred to another hospital because "There's

a doctor I know there." He had not consulted Tohru in advance, but since Tohru had no reason to object, he'd done as the man said.

The entire time he'd been checked in, only Fujishima had come to see him.

Other than hearing stories about the past from Fujishima, who came to visit once a day like clockwork, he had no means of finding out about himself. However, the man on whom he was depending had become most taciturn, so constructing his past took a long time.

According to Fujishima's story of his personal history, Tohru had lost his parents at an early age, had no siblings or close relatives—in short, he was completely alone in the world. He had graduated high school and was working as an express home delivery driver. He'd been fired from that job at the time of the accident and evicted from the apartment where he'd been living for nonpayment of rent. Tohru listened to the past spoken of so indifferently by the man, to the misfortunes that paraded by as if by prior arrangement, as if he were hearing the affairs of someone else entirely. He had no feeling that this was all about himself, at which point he only thought, "So I see." However, when his body had healed and he became aware of having checked out of the hospital, he abruptly became worried about his future life. The insurance on the car from his disabling accident would cover his hospitalization and treatment costs, Fujishima said. However, nothing was left over for paying anything else, such as the security deposit for renting a new apartment. Fujishima then handed him a tea envelope, saying it was valuable. It proved to contain

a personal seal, an insurance certificate, and 30,000 yen. There was no cell phone, which was strange. "Didn't I have a cell phone on me?" he asked Fujishima.

"It was a company phone, so it was returned when you left your job," he was told. It seemed he had not carried a private phone. There was also no bankbook among the valuables, so it appeared he'd had no savings. Including the 3,650 yen that he'd had in his wallet at the time of the accident with the contents of the envelope, Tohru's entire worldly assets totalled 33,650 yen.

He considered whether to borrow future living expenses from Fujishima, but it was difficult for him to bring up the subject of money. He had a friend he didn't remember. This friend had handled the necessary procedures for insurance, paying the hospital, etc. on his behalf, plus he'd come to see Tohru every day, so Tohru figured they'd become close. And yet, he was weary of measuring the distance between himself and this man drifting somewhere in aloofness.

One week before he'd left the hospital, Fujishima had suggested, "How about staying at my apartment for a while after you check out?" Initially thinking he was saved, Tohru then started worrying if it was all right, and so was unable to rejoice honestly. He knew Fujishima wasn't a bad man. On the contrary, he was almost too kind. And yet, the sense of incongruity he felt at chance moments troubled him greatly.

Tohru had wondered and asked if they couldn't be friendlier. "Where did we meet?"

After a silence so long that Tohru thought he was being ignored, Fujishima had replied, "We worked

at the same part-time job." He'd tried to ask what kind of part-time job, but Fujishima had left the hospital room before he could speak, and so the story ended there. He'd wondered what he could have had in common with a man six years his senior, even if they had worked together...and now three months had passed, and he still had no idea.

Tohru's life in the hospital had lasted quite a while, and his internal clock had apparently been set to wake him at 6:30 a.m., when the nurse started her rounds for drawing blood. Even here, he woke up at that same time, looked up at the clock on the wall and smiled. The room was nice and warm, and he didn't want to leave the cozy bed, but as he secluded himself in the sheets and drowsed, there came a sharp knock at the room's door. Startled, Tohru shot out of bed. It was 7:30 a.m. He remembered he was in someone's home, not the hospital, and ran to the door, lamenting his untidy state.

Fujishima stood there smoothly in a dark gray suit, his hair perfectly arranged. Tohru unconsciously straightened out of his slouch. He became ashamed of having just woken up and still being in his rumpled pajamas.

"I'm leaving for work. I should be back at 7:30." Having said that, Fujishima handed Tohru a 10,000-yen bill, folded double, and a key. "Here's the key to the place. And if you get hungry, get something to eat with this."

Tohru unconsciously pulled back. "I can't take that. It's way too much!"

"If there's any left over, you can buy necessities."

Pressing the money into Tohru's hand, Fujishima departed. Even after all signs of him were gone, an unvoicable awkwardness remained. Just buying a little juice or a sandwich when his hospital meals weren't enough had depleted Tohru's on-hand funds by about half. The remaining money would feed him for a month at best. He knew it might come to this sooner or later, but... accepting handouts like this gnawed at his pride as a man.

He couldn't let things stay this way. He couldn't let himself slowly become indebted to this man. His wounds from the accident were healed; even if he still had amnesia, he could get around. He could work well enough. Slapping himself on the right cheek and gathering his nerve, Tohru stepped out of the room. In the washroom, he cleaned his face and then shaved off his whiskers with the T-shaped razor he'd used while in the hospital. Feeling refreshed, he returned to his room, changed into jeans and a shirt, and put on his coat. Grasping the key tightly in his right hand, he left the apartment. Looking down from the passage in front of the entry hall, he saw a park right behind the building, something he had missed in the darkness last night. It was as spacious as a grade-school schoolyard.

He took the elevator to the first floor and walked out of the building. After an excessive look both ways, he crossed the street and entered the park. A footpath encircled the large lake in its center, and all around were sandboxes, swings, and objets d'art. Under a gazebo

near the lake, two young mothers with children in tow were having what seemed to be an enjoyable chat.

Leaving the park and cutting across the street, he spotted a shopping district with an arcade. It appeared to be an old shopping district, and the look of the stores was fairly retro, but it was still early in the morning, so they were all still closed, their shutters drawn down. Passing through the shopping district, he came upon a subway station. Beyond that was a bookstore. In the distance, he could see a drugstore billboard.

Tohru strolled about the area, frequently turning around to confirm the location of Fujishima's apartment building. If he got lost, that would be the end—he'd never be able to get back. He didn't know the apartment's phone number or address. If he didn't know the way home, even if he ran to a police call box, he wouldn't be able to tell them more than his name and age. The cold winter wind whipped past his ears. He hunched over and stuck his fingers in his coat pockets.

Uneasy about going too far, he turned back after reaching the front of the drugstore. As he walked along, his stomach let forth a growl. "Man, I'm hungry," he thought, walking along the outside of the park. With perfect timing, he spotted a convenience store diagonally across the way. Standing in front of the store as though it were pulling him in, Tohru noticed a "Help Wanted" ad pasted on the wall and gazed at it for a while, long enough to make the clerk inside inadvertently look at his face.

Fujishima returned home before eight that evening. Entering the living room with a tired expression,

he called out "I'm home" to Tohru, who was watching TV, then put a plastic bag from the convenience store on the two-person dining table.

"I bought us dinner. I'm going to change, so go ahead and start without me." Having said that, he left the room. Tohru removed the contents of the bag and laid them out on the table so dinner could begin right after the man returned. There were two full box lunches with side dishes and two PET bottles of tea. True to the typical bachelor, it seemed Fujishima didn't do cooking himself.

Having changed clothes, Fujishima returned and ate his meal in silence, attempting no conversation. Once he'd finished eating, he did some simple tidying up to throw away the empty containers in the garbage can, then immediately started to leave the living room. Confused, Tohru called out to stop him. "Hey, can I ask you something real quick?"

Fujishima returned to the dining table, sat in a chair, looked at the document spread out by Tohru and muttered the single word "resume..."

"I've decided to get a part-time job at the convenience store by the park. It's a night job, though. Anyway, they told me to hand in a resume, and I'll be bringing this in tomorrow, but since I can't remember.... Do I have to give them the name of my elementary school too?"

The man stared at the resume for a while, saying nothing.

"Grade school isn't necessary. High school and previous employers should do it."

"High school, huh...?" Unable to recall, Tohru sighed.

"Shouyou Municipal Academy."

"That's the name of the high school you went to."

Fujishima turned to face Tohru and put out his right hand. Flustered, Tohru handed him the ballpoint pen, and he wrote the name of the high school and all employers up to three months ago in small, angular letters on the back of the pasteboard included with the resume. Tohru transcribed these while referring to the sample sentences entered in the resume set.

"Why did you decide to get a part time job at the convenience store?" Fujishima's tone was not severe, yet there seemed to be an air of reproach to it.

"Because it's close by and I should be able to earn money right away. I'd feel bad being indebted to you all the time, and I want to save some money..."

"You don't have to worry about money." The man's voice was hard.

"But I don't want to rely on just someone else's favors. Later on, if it's okay, could I go ahead and straighten up those cardboard boxes when I've got a free moment?"

"You don't have to do things like that."

"So there IS stuff there I shouldn't just open on my own?"

"I didn't call you here to make you tidy up the room. You don't have to do a thing about this place. Just worry about yourself."

He understood Fujishima respected and was

considerate of him. And yet it would be a weight off his mind as a freeloader if he could get Fujishima to say, "Sure, go ahead."

"I'll have afternoons free, and I'll be restless if I don't do something.

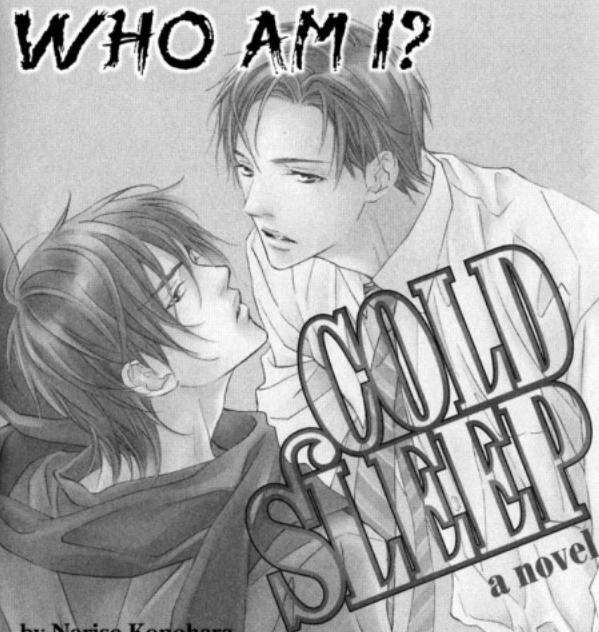
Isn't there anything I can just do on my own?"

Fujishima knitted his brow and made a sullen face. This was merely putting it out of the way. Deep down, Tohru wondered if he didn't think this was a serious matter. After a silence, the man finally opened his severe mouth.

"If it'll satisfy you, do what you want. Just never think of what you do around the apartment as 'your obligation.'"

COLD SLEEP

Coming Summer 2006 from



by Narise Konohara

Having lost his memory in an accident, Toru Takahisa tries to reclaim his past. Fujishima is the man that takes Toru in, claiming to be his friend. Find out what happens in this exciting new novel.



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